



**OFFICE FOR STANDARDS  
IN EDUCATION**

**INSPECTION OF  
READING  
LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

**February 2001**

**OFFICE OF HER MAJESTY'S CHIEF INSPECTOR OF SCHOOLS  
in conjunction with the  
AUDIT COMMISSION**

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## **APPENDIX: SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

## INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection was carried out by OFSTED in conjunction with the Audit Commission under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The inspection used *The Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities* (September 2000) which focuses on the effectiveness of the work of the local education authority (LEA) 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 involved the analysis of data and scrutiny of documentation from the LEA, information from school inspections and audit reports. Discussions were held with LEA members, staff in the education and community service directorate and in other Council departments, as well as representatives of the LEA's partners. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on the aspects of the LEA's work was circulated to 57 schools and Pupil Referral Units. The response rate was 91 per cent.
3. The inspection sought to establish the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to one nursery school, 11 primary schools, four secondary schools, one all-age special school and one pupil referral unit. The visits tested the views of governors, headteachers and other staff on the key aspects of the LEA's school improvement strategy. The visits also considered whether the support provided by the LEA contributes, where appropriate, to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in the school, and provides value for money.

## COMMENTARY

4. Reading Borough Council serves a prosperous area with very low levels of unemployment. Nevertheless, within the compact town there is considerable diversity: substantial wealth alongside social deprivation; differing ethnic communities with an increasing number of refugees; and polarised expectations of education and employment. Schools reflect that diversity. Within the LEA are some of the most successful selective maintained schools in the country, whilst a significant proportion of others are failing to give their pupils an adequate education. Many schools are underachieving: only a few compare favourably with like schools. Standards in primary schools are below those found nationally. Standards in secondary schools, boosted by the selective schools whose intake comes primarily from outside the borough, are in line with national averages, but the performance of the majority is below that found in like schools.

5. The Council took on responsibility for education following local government re-organisation (LGR) in April 1998. Despite finding the management of education a new and significant challenge, elected members have shown themselves prepared to tackle difficult issues, for example, in relation to both the under and over provision of school places in different parts of the borough, which had previously lain unresolved. Decision-making has been enhanced by the all-party commitment to education. Schools have also benefited from the Council's support for education that manifests itself through spending above the standard spending assessment (SSA). However, members have not yet tackled the uneconomical arrangement of sixth form provision.

6. The LEA is well led. The leadership has the confidence and trust of schools. It is seen to be 'school-friendly', willing to take difficult decisions and effective in making Council decision-making more transparent to schools. There is a clear commitment to raising standards and a dogged determination so to do.

7. The LEA has fully embraced the concept of support in inverse proportion to success and effectively communicated not just the concept, but the reality of this, to schools. Resources have been appropriately targeted at those schools in greatest need. The small, but effective, education standards team has worked, in the main, successfully, to support the high proportion of schools causing concern. The LEA has shown itself to be intolerant of poor performance and has facilitated the removal of a significant number of teachers and senior managers who could no longer fulfil the role required of them. This has been achieved at a time when the LEA, like its schools, has been frustrated in its work through recruitment difficulties - it is only recently, from May 2000, that the education standards team has had a full complement of staff.

8. Nevertheless, some working practices inherited from the old borough Council, pre-LGR, have undermined the new LEA's relationship with its schools. Corporate services have found it difficult to adjust to working with autonomous schools. There was, for some time, a lack of appreciation that a wide range of corporate policies and services could not be foisted on to schools. In particular, the provision of payroll and financial support, as well as the management of the maintenance of school buildings,

has been unsatisfactory. It took intervention at the highest level in the Council for sufficiently robust action to be taken to tackle schools' concerns. In the meantime, many schools, rightly, have sought services from elsewhere. However, these three services have improved very recently and are no longer unsatisfactory; nevertheless, these improvements are, as yet, insecure.

9. Schools have also been poorly served for many years by wholly inadequate funding for repairs and maintenance of buildings. The Council has committed additional funding to tackle this, but significantly more is needed.

10. The following functions covered in the inspection were judged to be particularly effective:

- quality of leadership given by senior officers;
- securing improvements in schools causing concern;
- monitoring, challenge, support and intervention in primary schools;
- early years provision;
- the management of school places;
- admissions to schools;
- implementation of the National Grid for Learning (NGfL);
- behaviour support to primary schools; and
- allocation of resources to priorities.

11. The following functions are currently performed inadequately:

- provision of performance data and target-setting;
- challenge to under-performing secondary schools;
- provision of personnel support to schools;
- the efficient provision of sixth form places;
- property services; and
- support for child protection, including guidance and co-ordination of training.

12. Overall, strengths outweigh weaknesses.

13. The Council was left a poor inheritance. Some key challenges have been successfully tackled and resolved. Nevertheless, there is some way to go to make the LEA fully effective. This will require the continued commitment of members and officers, working in close partnership with schools, to secure continued improvement both in pupil attainment and the provision of effective services. In all areas of weakness, there is evidence of improvement, albeit slight in some instances. The Council has the capacity and commitment to undertake the action required on the recommendations made; recent improvements must be maintained.

## **SECTION ONE**

### **THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

#### **Context**

14. Following Local Government re-organisation, Reading became a unitary authority on 1 April 1998, following the division of Berkshire County Council. The new, small authority was based upon the pre-existing borough Council's systems and structures. Reading, situated 40 miles west of London and just north of the M4, is a compact urban area, with a wide diversity in both social and economic conditions, ethnic mix and educational provision and expectation. The cost of living and of housing is high. Good communication links have led to the growth of the town in which its traditional industries of 'beer, bulbs and biscuits' have been replaced by modern hi-tech industries such as insurance and information technology. Consequently, unemployment is low and, at 1.9 per cent, is half the national average. Nevertheless, one-fifth of Reading residents live in wards amongst the ten per cent most deprived in England, ranking the local authority as the 112<sup>th</sup> most deprived nationally (out of a total of 354). The population of the town has risen steadily since 1981 and is currently 147,840 (1998 figures). The increase in population is forecast to continue. Of the adult population, a greater proportion has a higher educational qualification than is the national norm.

15. Since vesting day, the Council has had to grapple, increasingly successfully, with a bleak inheritance from its parent authority. Amongst the challenges it faced were:

- low standards in a significant number of schools;
- one school in special measures and, within six months of vesting, two further schools requiring special measures and two more identified as having serious weaknesses;
- high levels of pupil exclusion and an increasing number of pupils out of full-time education;
- school buildings in a poor state of repair; £11.9m now needs to be spent to tackle priority 1 and 2 repairs;
- 860 pupils with statements of special educational need of whom 402 did not attend Reading schools; moreover, the majority of pupils with statements attended special schools rather than mainstream provision;
- a high proportion of surplus places, 22 per cent, in the secondary sector.

16. In January 2000, there were 17,463 pupils in Reading's schools, including 555 children in maintained nursery schools. Pupils' entitlement to free school meals is in line with the national average in both primary and secondary schools. The proportions of statemented pupils in primary schools and in secondary special schools are both above the national average. The proportion of pupils of ethnic minority origin is 18.1 per cent, compared with 11.7 per cent nationally. In 1999, a high proportion of pupils, 67 per cent, stayed on into full-time education post-16, with a further 19 per cent entering employment or training.

17. Reading is a small LEA, maintaining only 55 schools. There are five nursery schools, four infant schools, three junior schools, 32 primary schools, eight 11-18 secondary schools and three special schools. In addition, there are two secondary pupil referral units (PRUs). Five primary schools, one nursery school and two secondary schools are resourced to support pupils with particular special educational needs. The secondary schools are diverse: five were grant maintained. Of these five, two are selective grammar schools; one, a single-sex girls' school, is partially selective; one is voluntary aided and the other is a foundation technology college. Two secondary schools are small, having fewer than 600 pupils; three have fewer than 80 pupils in the sixth form. Nursery places are available in 20 of the LEA's 36 primary and infant schools. Currently, all four-year olds and 90 per cent of three-year olds have access to at least part-time nursery provision.

18. Only 60 per cent of the pupils who are educated at Reading primary schools transfer to the borough's secondary schools; the remainder transfer either to secondary schools outside the borough or to independent schools. Conversely, there is an inflow of pupils into the authority of about 10 per cent to attend, primarily but not exclusively, the two single sex grammar schools; fewer than 20 per cent of the borough's primary pupils attend these two selective schools.

## **Performance**

19. A detailed analysis of the performance of schools was supplied to the LEA in an OFSTED profile. It highlights these features of performance:

- OFSTED inspectors judged the attainment on entry to primary school to be poor in 48 per cent of schools. This is much greater than found nationally.
- Pupils in primary schools are, on average, achieving lower levels of attainment than nationally. For example, at both Key Stages 1 and 2, the proportion of pupils reaching level 2 and level 4 respectively is below the national norm on all the tests. Nevertheless, in Key Stage 2, the proportion of girls achieving level 5+ in English is above that found nationally.
- Secondary school results need to be treated with caution, as a result of the influx of higher achieving pupils from outside the borough into the two selective grammar schools. In 2000, the proportion of pupils achieving level 5+ at Key Stage 3 in all three subjects was below national norms. This contrasts with results in 1999, which were in line with the national data. Moreover, in 1999, the proportion of boys and girls achieving at least level 6 was, respectively, well above and above that found nationally. This resulted in only a 4.9 percentage point difference between the genders, much less than the national figure.
- At Key Stage 4, the proportion of pupils achieving five or more A\*-C grades is close to the national average whereas the proportion of pupils gaining five or more A\*-G and one or more A\*-G grades is well below the national average.
- Rates of improvement between 1997 and 2000 at Key Stage 1 have exceeded those achieved nationally in reading, writing and mathematics. Moreover, the proportion of boys achieving level 3+ in reading has improved at a much faster



rate than found nationally. Similarly, rates of improvement in all the core subjects at Key Stage 2 are greater than achieved nationally. The increase in the proportion of girls (11.7 per cent) achieving level 5+ also significantly exceeds the national rate (6.9 per cent).

- In the last three years, the increase in the proportion of pupils achieving one or more A\*-G grades and five or more A\*-G grades is greater than found nationally. Moreover, the proportion of pupils achieving five or more A\*-C grades increased by three per cent between 1999 and 2000 - three times the national rate of improvement.
- The average point score per pupil entered for two or more A-level/Advanced GNVQs is above the national average.
- Overall, the majority of schools are achieving levels of attainment below that of similar schools. For example, in 1999, 44 per cent of Reading's primary schools were in the bottom quartile of schools for reading at Key Stage 1 and 45 per cent of schools were in the bottom quartile for mathematics at Key Stage 2. At Key Stage 3, 25 per cent of schools were in the bottom five per cent of their benchmark group for mathematics.
- OFSTED inspection data show that a higher proportion of primary schools (16 per cent) require much improvement in comparison with four per cent nationally. At their last inspection, half of the secondary schools were judged overall to be good or very good; one required much improvement.
- Since OFSTED inspections began in 1993, a total of seven schools (five primary, one secondary and one secondary special school for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties) have required special measures. The secondary school was removed from special measures after almost 24 months and one of the primary schools after 15 months. One primary school has, with DfEE approval and recent funding, made a Fresh Start after one year in special measures. Two of the other primary schools are making at least satisfactory progress; it is planned to close the remaining two schools. Three primary schools are deemed to have serious weaknesses.
- Attendance levels in primary and secondary schools are in line with that found nationally, although levels of unauthorised absence in primary schools are almost twice the national mean. The proportion of permanent exclusions from both primary and secondary schools has risen significantly in the last three years. However, in 1999/2000, secondary schools reduced permanent exclusions by 40 per cent, bringing the overall level much closer to the national average.

## **Funding**

20. The education standard spending assessment (SSA) for Reading is slightly above both the average for unitary authorities and its statistical neighbours. Since becoming a unitary authority, the Council has spent above the SSA, reflecting the corporate priority given to education.

	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001
Budget £m	46.820	48.882	51.923
Education SSA £m	45.600	48.042	50.386
Budget as proportion of SSA	103%	102%	103%

21. In 2000-1 the Local Schools Budget (LSB) amounted to £2,871 per pupil, slightly lower than that of statistical neighbours, £2,929, but above the national average of £2,817. The proportion of LSB delegated to schools rose to 84.3 per cent in 2000-1. The increase of 12.6 per cent was higher than achieved by similar authorities or nationally. The amount delegated to schools, averaging £2,420 per pupil is close to that of similar authorities, £2,472, and the national average of £2,373.

22. The Council has been successful in securing additional funding. For example, over £13m has been received from the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) for area-based projects which focus on housing, environment, crime, employment and community capacity building. Five schools have benefited from SRB money which has been used to develop information and communication technology (ICT) facilities. Funding has also been obtained from a local employer to create a successful alternative Year 11 provision and £375K from the Home Office for a project focused on one secondary school to reduce crime. The Council has successfully bid for a large housing Private Funding Initiative (PFI).

23. The Council is committed to improving the quality of school buildings and securing enough capital for this is a major priority. The Council has set aside £3.6m to fund the £8.9m schools' capital programme during the period 1998-2001, and aims to unlock some major capital receipts to recycle into education. Members are considering a PFI for education as well as other partnerships with private developers to fund school capital improvements.

### **Council Structure**

24. Reading Borough Council consists of 36 Labour, three Conservative and six Liberal Democrat elected members. In response to the Government's proposals for *Modernising Local Government*, the Council opted to adopt a 'cabinet with leader' model from May 1999. The cabinet operates as an executive board and consists of the leader, deputy leader and eight lead members, including one for education. Six scrutiny panels have been set up to cover: standards; audit and Best Value scrutiny; Best Value reviews (2); cross-service and thematic service reviews (2). The scrutiny panel that reviews education also covers social services and housing - a broad remit.

25. The maintenance of the borough's boundaries on LGR meant that, unlike many other of the newly formed unitary authorities, there was no opportunity to start again with a new corporate centre employed on the basis of providing services to

schools. Consequently, responsibilities for education were initially 'bolted on' to historical corporate services with little understanding of the needs of schools.

## **Education Development Plan**

26. The Education Development Plan, *Learning in Reading*, aims to articulate a strategy and action to underpin the Council's principles for the new education service. The Plan is satisfactory, appropriate and manageable. It was formulated following extensive discussion and consultation with headteachers on the development of an improvement strategy for Reading and a thorough audit of strengths and weaknesses. Representative headteachers then worked with officers to draw up the activity plans. The Education Development Plan has been approved by the Secretary of State for three years.

27. The priorities defined in the Education Development Plan are:

- to raise standards of literacy in all schools;
- to raise standards of numeracy in all schools;
- to raise standards of attainment at GCSE;
- to improve the quality of teaching, especially in schools causing concern;
- to improve leadership and management in schools;
- to improve the management of pupils' behaviour; and
- to raise levels of public awareness of and involvement in the work of the education service.

28. Although the school survey indicated that headteachers were generally satisfied with the consultation on the Plan, there was less recognition of the relevance of the priorities to their schools than indicated by headteachers visited during the inspection. Except for one, those visited felt the priorities were appropriate and a judicious reflection of national imperatives and local needs. Many applauded the inclusion of an activity to 'develop strategies to recruit and train a high quality teaching staff' - recruitment being a serious problem for all schools throughout Reading. Moreover, the LEA is right to recognise, for example, the local challenge facing the Council's services upon becoming a unitary authority in responding to the needs of schools. Although the Plan does not include a priority dedicated to the development of ICT, the application of ICT to raise standards, for example in literacy and numeracy, as well as in the leadership and management of schools, permeates, appropriately, a number of the activities. The Plan does not include sufficient emphasis on raising the achievement of ethnic minority pupils and children in public care, nor of tackling issues surrounding pupil mobility. There is evidence that some headteachers have cross-referenced their school development plan against the Education Development Plan, but this is not yet universal.

29. The Education Development Plan was one of the first major plans to be drawn up by the new unitary authority. Consequently, elements of it have been superseded by the Ethnic Minority and Travellers Achievement Grant (EMTAG) Action Plan and the Council's Best Value Performance Plan. There are appropriate linkages between the Education Development Plan and the priorities of the Behaviour Support Plan.

30. The priorities are supported by 30 clear activities. However, some of the actions are insufficiently targeted at groups of pupils or schools who need the most support. Success criteria are variable; some are clear and measurable, others are too general. Nevertheless, the allocation of responsibility for the implementation of activities is clear, as are associated time frames. Arrangements for monitoring and evaluating each activity are specified, although there is insufficient involvement of headteachers in this work. However, mechanisms are in place for the members' school improvement panel to monitor progress. A recent report on the progress of each activity lacks the rigour and detail to be a powerful evaluative tool. Moreover, in instances in which success criteria are nebulous, the analysis of progress is too subjective. Nevertheless, progress on one priority, behaviour, is good and satisfactory progress has been made on six of the others. Very limited progress has been made on the activities in the priority 'raising standards of attainment at GCSE', despite a creditable improvement in the proportion of pupils achieving five or more grades at GCSE A\*-C by three percentage points. Progress has been impeded by the lack of availability of performance data to identify under-achieving groups and too few staff in the education standards team to co-ordinate the dissemination of good practice.

31. The targets set by schools at Key Stage 2 are insufficiently challenging for many. For example, in almost one-third of the 34 primary schools, the 2000 literacy targets were less than those achieved in 1997. Eight primary schools had 2000 numeracy targets less than they achieved in 1997. A greater challenge is being made of secondary schools, with only one insufficiently challenged in terms of GCSE attainment at five or more A\*-C grades in 2000. However, one school insisted on setting an impossibly optimistic GCSE target; this has now been significantly reduced to a more realistic level. Nevertheless, having attained the GCSE targets for 2000, too little overall improvement is expected in subsequent years; in particular, no improvement in the proportion of pupils achieving one or more A\*-G grade is planned.

32. Although attainment targets for ethnic minority pupils have been determined in order to secure EMTAG funding, they are not included in the Education Development Plan. Moreover, targets set for children in public care are not based on data that reflect pupils' prior attainment.

### **Allocation of resources to priorities**

33. Reading is successful at targeting its limited resources to corporate and education priorities. The Council builds its budgets corporately from agreed priorities. It is a small authority with low balances facing big budget pressures. Financial monitoring and control are satisfactory and the first out-turns for the new authority were close to budget. However, robust medium term planning linking budgets to service plans has only been in place for one year.

34. Compared with statistical neighbours, retained expenditure is higher on early years education and on transport costs. Home-to-school transport costs, at £86 per pupil, are greater than the mean in unitary authorities (£52) and nationally (£74) owing to the high cost of provision for special educational needs (SEN) pupils, many of whom are placed out of borough. Central administration is lower than average and

school improvement costs are half the national average. The LEA acknowledges that central recharges to education need increased scrutiny and reduction. Schools do not have specifications for centrally retained services, such as planning and resourcing, nor a breakdown of their costs

35. Within the overall 2000-1 education budget, allocations vary from the SSA blocks. Spending on under-fives is higher by 44 per cent, reflecting the relatively high number of nursery schools; the 11-15 age-group budget is six per cent higher than SSA to take into account the protected funding enjoyed by the five ex-grant maintained schools. Spending on primary schools is seven per cent lower than the SSA allocation.

36. To date, the old Berkshire resourcing formula has been slightly amended to increase funding to meet priority needs such as post-16 and building repairs as well as to protect the level of funding to the ex-grant maintained schools. The LEA is currently systematically reviewing both the formula and the overall level of funding required for schools through the development of an activity-led model; this includes consideration of the primary/secondary differential. Schools are fully involved in the consultation, and major changes will be made for the 2002-3 budget.

37. Outcomes of the SEN review will rightly inform future funding decisions for social inclusion and SEN provision in mainstream schools, special schools and resourced units. The high home-to-school transport costs are being tackled through the reduction in out-borough placements and changes in transport contracting arrangements. A target reduction of ten per cent in transport costs has already been set for next year's budget.

38. The LEA has developed an appropriate formula for class-size funding which enables primary schools to have an extra teacher before all the extra children arrive in the three reception intakes.

### **Structures for achieving Best Value**

39. Understandably, the Council is still developing and refining its approach to Best Value. However, it did participate in a Best Value pilot which focused on the role of partnerships in improving cross-cutting services. The external auditor, when commenting on the Council's Best Value Performance Plan, indicated the need to: strengthen the use of performance indicators, embed newly introduced performance management systems into routine practice, and define clearly the corporate approach to challenge, procurement and comparison. Within the education and community directorate, the new performance management processes are now established with objectives linked to national and local indicators and to individual performance appraisal.

40. The programme of Best Value reviews of education services is based on priorities, but, like those in other directorates, is too fragmented. Two education reviews are now underway, in equality services and music tuition. The narrow scope of the reviews means they are disproportionately time-consuming and likely to have limited impact on improvement. Members are considering broadening the scope of reviews to wider, customer-themed services. To date, the overview of wider themes

has been undertaken by scrutiny committees. Although this work complements best value reviews, the role of members in Best Value reviews and the scrutiny function and the relationship between the two are not sufficiently clear.

41. In the past year there has been clear commitment by members and officers to improve services by challenging and eliminating the vestiges of the pre-LGR borough Council culture which lacked performance management structures or customer focus. There has been genuine consultation with schools by the lead member, Chief Executive, director of education and staff at all levels, which has confronted unsatisfactory services and led to their improvement. Moreover, schools can now access assistance to help them to purchase from other providers. There is evidence of improvement in the quality of services in the six months between the schools completing the school survey and the inspection. A key example is the improvement in attitude, quality and cost of work of the direct service organisation, noted by many of the schools who have used it recently.

## **Recommendations**

### **In order to improve the effectiveness of the school improvement strategy:**

- in consultation with headteachers, amend the Education Development Plan and the arrangements for evaluating its effectiveness to:
  - incorporate activities targeted at raising the achievement of ethnic minority pupils, pupils in public care and those who experience frequent changes of school;
  - ensure all activities are clearly focused upon groups of pupils and schools who most need support;
  - ensure success criteria are specific and measurable; and
  - ensure strategies for monitoring the progress and impact of the Plan are robust and incorporate the views of stakeholders.

### **In order to ensure that the Council secures Best Value and promotes continuous improvement:**

- evaluate Best Value reviews carried out so far to inform future practice in relation to:
  - maximising the effectiveness of officers' and members' time when carrying out Best Value reviews and/or the scrutiny function; and
  - ensuring the Best Value reviews are of sufficient breadth to have a real impact on the services experienced by users.

## **SECTION TWO**

### **SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

#### **Implications of other functions**

42. The LEA's drive for school improvement is supported by an Education Development Plan which satisfactorily sets out strategies to meet local and national development needs. There are signs of improvement in each of its priorities. Standards of attainment are rising at Key Stages 1, 2 and 4 at, or above, national rates.

43. Most of the work of the LEA, especially in the education standards section, supports school improvement well. Some weaknesses have impeded developments. These include limitations in the provision of data on pupil and school performance; inadequate support to school managers from the finance, personnel and payroll services; and the poor condition of school buildings. Improvements are now evident in all of these services, but are not yet sufficient or secure.

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

44. The functions of monitoring, challenge, support and intervention are exercised well in the primary phase. In the special and secondary schools, intervention is good, monitoring and support are satisfactory, but challenge is sometimes weak. The LEA has clearly defined and published its arrangements for monitoring, challenging, supporting and intervening in schools. Its procedures are fully in accordance with the Government's policy of intervention in inverse proportion to success and with encouraging schools to strive towards autonomy. Although the school survey indicated some disquiet about the relatively low level of support given to the more successful schools, the school visits revealed a considered acceptance among headteachers and chairs of governors that it is essential for the LEA to target its support where it is most needed.

45. Link advisers routinely and adequately monitor all schools using an appropriate range of instruments which include a half-day per term monitoring visit, data analysis and inspection reports. In schools causing concern, routine monitoring is rightly more intensive. Officers in the education standards section have a good insight into the effectiveness of management, standards of attainment, quality of teaching, ethos and behaviour in all primary schools. At secondary level, the LEA has sound knowledge of the effectiveness of senior management, governance, attainment, ethos and key issues. Knowledge of the quality of teaching across the curriculum is less secure, except in schools causing concern where intensive evaluation gives a good insight into strengths and weaknesses. Wide-ranging discussions within the LEA enable intelligence about individual schools to be spread widely. Senior staff of the LEA and elected members are kept well informed, especially about schools causing concern, through twice termly meetings of the director's monitoring group and the members' school improvement panel. This underpins the LEA's capacity to make decisions quickly and authoritatively, for example, in creating a Fresh Start school.

46. Using its knowledge of schools, the LEA is in a sound position from which to challenge under-performance or under-expectation. The director has clearly expressed the Council's intention strongly to promote improvement. During the school visits, many examples of sharp and pertinent challenge, leading to improved procedures and performance, were evidenced, especially in the primary schools. For example, one primary headteacher had been pressed to draw up the school's ICT development plan, which, when produced to a high standard, led to a more extensive use of ICT within the classroom. Primary advisers are highly regarded in the schools and they have demonstrated the capacity, expertise and tact to support and challenge these schools appropriately. However, there are clear instances in which those secondary schools performing below like schools have not been sufficiently challenged. The LEA is understandably wary about souring relations with its secondary schools which have traditionally been autonomous. Nevertheless, it was clear during the inspection that some of the reluctance of secondary headteachers to accept the LEA's role in raising standards had been unreasonable. The LEA now needs to overcome these obstacles in order to deal as effectively with secondary school under-performance as it has done in primary schools.

47. The education standards team is small and expert. The core team comprises the head of service, six advisers, the head of equality services, project managers for Key Stage 3 and National Grid for Learning (NGfL) and four literacy and numeracy consultants. The team, together with a range of consultants who are recommended by the LEA for specific tasks, provides a sound level of support for school improvement at a very modest cost. Value for money is high. Primary schools are aided well in this way, as are schools causing concern.

48. The LEA has robust procedures for intervening in schools which cause concern. These are based upon a clear understanding of performance in the schools, a well defined system of intervention, and the effective galvanising of support from a range of Council services to bring about improvement. Appropriately, a great deal of effort has been put into intervention in the 20 per cent of the LEA's schools which have caused concern. It has been very effective.

49. Inspection and advisory support are provided by the well-managed education standards team. The staff are well qualified and have a good range of recent management experience in both the primary and secondary phases. Their work with schools is well planned, monitored and managed. The team was initially too small to provide a sufficiently effective service to the LEA's schools, but since its recent expansion, it appears to be just adequately resourced to carry out its functions. Good use is made of external consultants whose work is known to the LEA, often by recommending them to schools for specific tasks for which the LEA deems them to be effective. In a similar way, the LEA has also made very good use of short-term secondments of effective managers from its stronger schools to help struggling schools to improve. Performance management is sound and the head of service has a clear understanding of the effectiveness of his staff in their work with schools. Regular review of performance by the head of service reveals training needs which are met largely by on-the-job guidance from a mentor, a senior adviser and by participating in headteacher training. Formal in-service training is limited, however, and the value of recent participation by some advisers in national courses is unclear.



## **Collection and analysis of data**

50. Until recently, the quality of data provided by the LEA on pupils' performance has been unsatisfactory. This year, schools have been provided with useful comparative data. However, this does not identify schools. This lack of transparency limits the effectiveness of the use of this data by schools to identify examples of successful practice. Although training has been provided on the use of performance data, there is still some insecurity in schools, for example, due to staff changes, about how to use the information most productively. Nevertheless, examples were found of link advisers working effectively with headteachers and assessment co-ordinators on the analysis of performance data.

51. Support for target setting has been poor, and, despite recent improvements, is not yet satisfactory. Schools have not received detailed written guidance on how to set targets or monitor pupils' progress across key stages. Although a number of schools have developed their own effective systems for setting targets, this is not universal. The LEA has provided insufficient challenge to a significant minority of schools who have set modest targets, some of which were *ad hoc* and based on little or no analysis of pupils' prior attainment. Previously, link advisers have not always challenged the robustness of schools' methods to set targets, although one secondary school visited has recently been challenged to set targets by looking at pupils' performance in each subject. The director has challenged those schools where targets set were unrealistic and too low; this led, for instance, in 13 primary schools raising their targets, which were subsequently met or exceeded in either literacy or numeracy by nine of the schools. It is only in the last twelve months that schools have been trained in the use of 'assessment manager', the LEA's preferred software system for target setting. Nevertheless, training to help schools analyse nationally available data has been useful.

52. The LEA has not given sufficient attention to the value added improvement in pupils' attainment between different phases, groups and contexts as they progress through each stage. Recently, the LEA has taken steps to collect and store pupil level data using a sophisticated database which will facilitate more detailed analysis. Although the LEA has collected raw data from schools on the achievements of ethnic minority pupils in 1998, and does so annually on attainment at GCSE, schools do not systematically receive an analysis of this data nor undertake their own. In addition, schools with a high level of pupil mobility find it difficult to make valid comparisons over time.

53. The transfer of pupils' performance data between primary and secondary schools has been unsatisfactory, but is improving with the use of the software package 'assessment manager' by schools. Although all but five schools attended effective training on the software, not all primary schools used this method to transfer data to secondary schools last summer.

## **Support for literacy**

54. Support for literacy is now satisfactory and, although standards at Key Stage 2 are below those found nationally, they are rising at a faster rate. This year, 70 per

cent of Key Stage 2 pupils in the borough achieved level 4 or over in English, thus exceeding the LEA's 2000 target of 66 per cent. Satisfactory progress has been made towards its 2002 target of 76 per cent of pupils achieving level 4 and above. The proportion of pupils achieving level 5 and above is in line with national averages, with the performance of girls above that found nationally. At Key Stage 1, the proportion of pupils achieving level two or more in writing has improved considerably from 74.7 per cent in 1999 to 80 per cent this year, a rate of improvement almost seven times that achieved nationally.

55. Staffing difficulties impeded an effective commencement of the National Literacy Strategy, and the Literacy Action Plan has only recently been developed. The senior primary adviser, well supported by the literacy consultant, manages the National Literacy Strategy, which has gained momentum since September 1999. The new team is competent. Recent training for all relevant staff, including governors and classroom assistants, has been both effective and appreciated by schools. Six leading literacy teachers have been trained, and provide demonstration lessons to those schools requiring additional help. There have been useful contributions from related services on, for instance, managing the strategy in respect of pupils with special educational needs and with English as an additional language. Link advisers monitor the implementation of the strategy in their schools and produce reports with pertinent recommendations about improvement. Links have been established with the Basic Skills' Agency, Volunteer Reading Service and Reading and Language Centre to raise the awareness of parents and the wider community on literacy issues.

56. There has been a significant and marked improvement in the performance of primary schools receiving intensive support. For example, of the 11 schools receiving intensive support last year, all but two have increased the proportion of pupils achieving level 4 or over by ten percentage points or more.

57. Until recently, little support has been provided to secondary schools, although there was a Key Stage 3 literacy conference in the summer of 1999. Standards in English at Key Stage 3 have fallen this year. In 1999, the proportion of pupils achieving level 5 or over (66 per cent) was slightly above, but in line with, the national mean. This year, only 58 per cent of pupils achieved level 5 or over compared with 63 per cent nationally. Five of the eight secondary schools have run literacy summer schools and have received help from the LEA in their organisation, staffing, provision of resources and selection of pupils. One secondary school is also undertaking some useful work with its feeder schools by sharing good practice through lesson observation and teacher exchanges. Secondary schools have welcomed the introduction of the Key Stage 3 strategy.

### **Support for numeracy**

58. Support for numeracy is good in primary schools and satisfactory in secondary schools. Standards of attainment at both Key Stages 1 and 2 have risen considerably in the last two years and are now close to national norms. For example, in 1998, 80.6 per cent of pupils achieved level 2 or over, compared with 84.8 per cent nationally; in 2000, 88 per cent of pupils achieved level 2 or over compared with 90 per cent nationally. This year, 69 per cent of pupils at Key Stage 2 achieved level

4 or over compared with 72 per cent nationally. Moreover, the rate of improvement of 15.8 percentage points exceeds the mean national achievement of 13.5 percentage points. The LEA exceeded its 2000 target of 62.9 per cent of pupils achieving level 4 or over and is on target to reach its 2002 target of 73 per cent.

59. Ten schools received intensive support for numeracy in 1999-2000. Of these, six improved the proportion of pupils achieving level 4 or over, four of them by at least ten percentage points. Overall, however, of the 35 primary schools, almost half failed to improve the proportion of pupils achieving level 4 or over between 1999 and 2000. Nevertheless, primary schools receiving intensive support are very appreciative of the high quality support provided by the consultants and the senior primary adviser.

60. The numeracy strategy is effectively managed, with support well-planned, appropriately targeted and timely. There is a clear action plan for raising standards of numeracy in all schools which is complemented by a number of activities in the Education Development Plan which are varied, comprehensive and well focused. For example, support has included a focus on the practical application and language of mathematics. This has led to close and productive links with local industry; for example, the Central Berkshire Education Business Partnership (CBEBP) has supported 600 Year 5 pupils on a project 'Water Counts', which offered a range of enjoyable numerical activities and cross-curricular problems for pupils to solve.

61. The LEA provided useful training for teachers on the trial materials for the National Numeracy Strategy well before its launch in September 1999. Training was also provided to ten leading mathematics teachers. The consultants are well respected; schools consistently report that training has been very good and matched appropriately to their needs. The consultants have taught demonstration lessons and in at least three instances, for example, have assisted schools in undertaking an audit of teachers' needs. School co-ordinators in primary schools value the LEA's numeracy support network.

62. An encouraging start has been made to the pilot Key Stage 3 strategy. Visits to secondary schools revealed an enthusiasm to adopt the national numeracy strategy and practical and innovative approaches to mathematics teaching. Training provided to date has been well received. The LEA assisted in the organisation and training for those secondary schools which have held summer numeracy schools.

### **Support for information and communication technology**

63. The Council has developed a well thought out and clear corporate strategy for ICT which has provided a useful framework for LEA ICT developments - these are well managed. There are a number of consultative groups involving headteachers which have been instrumental in taking forward, both within the LEA and schools, the NGfL initiative and developments in the use of ICT in education administration. Nevertheless, insufficient emphasis has been placed upon raising pupils' attainment in ICT capability.

64. NGfL has been successfully introduced into Reading schools. Schools in the first tranche benefited, in particular, from the provision of laptops, projectors and

training which enabled teachers to quickly integrate the use of ICT into their classroom practice. This year, NGfL money has ensured that all primary schools are networked and have access to the internet. Schools have received useful guidance to develop their own Internet access policy, and training has been available to investigate the use of the internet in teaching and learning. The vast majority of schools now use email effectively and many pupils have email addresses. The LEA usefully ran a conference at which New Opportunities Fund (NOF) providers were invited to present to headteachers and ICT co-ordinators their training packages. This provided a valuable opportunity for schools to short-list potential trainers and subsequently select those that best met schools' individual needs. Helpfully, at least three of the secondary schools have provided courses for teachers on basic ICT skills in preparation for NOF training.

65. To date, there has been too little support for the development of pupils' ICT capability and the use of ICT to enhance attainment in other subject areas. The LEA rightly acknowledges that its strategy, which placed an emphasis on the development of infrastructure, now needs to be revisited with a new focus on standards. Primary schools have, however, been provided with helpful advice on schemes of work and some have received help with developing their own web sites.

66. Technical support is co-ordinated by the LEA via a help-line. Schools have welcomed the good advice given on the siting of hardware, including networks.

67. Support for the use of ICT in school administration is good. In particular, effective training has been given to both teachers and office staff on the use of assessment software, as well as on upgrades to finance and pupil data. The LEA has helpfully developed software to improve the coherence and connectivity between schools' finance systems and the central LEA system. Good progress has been made on the introduction of unique pupil numbers and there is a positive approach to trial the pupil level annual census in all schools in spring 2001. The LEA has also shown itself to be responsive to schools' needs, for example, by exploring ways in which to link schools' separate curriculum and administrative networks so as to ease access to assessment manager for teachers through the curriculum network.

### **Support for schools causing concern**

68. The LEA provides accurately targeted, sufficiently intensive and effective support for schools causing concern. This has rightly been a major priority since Local Government re-organisation, when the new LEA inherited a large number of under-performing schools. School inspections confirm that the LEA has a higher proportion of schools requiring much improvement than is the case nationally. Seven schools have been in special measures (one secondary, five primary and one secondary special). Three primary schools have been deemed to have serious weaknesses. In addition, the LEA has concerns about a further four primary schools and two secondary schools. Two schools have been removed from special measures within acceptable periods; another has become a Fresh Start school and two are currently progressing satisfactorily. The closure of the remaining two schools is planned. The three schools with serious weaknesses are making satisfactory or good progress. Progress in the other schools causing concern is satisfactory, except

where continuing weaknesses in their senior management hinder them from capitalising on the LEA's support.

69. The Education Development Plan contains a well thought out strategy for intervening in schools causing concern. The LEA has accurate and regular procedures to monitor schools and thus detect weaknesses quickly. Schools are placed into one of five categories depending on performance. The levels of advisory support given within each category vary appropriately according to need and are clearly published in the Plan.

70. The LEA's strategy for schools causing concern is efficiently implemented and its effectiveness carefully monitored by senior education staff. Much has been done to help school managers and teachers to improve their effectiveness. Where individuals have not been able to come up to scratch, the LEA has been assiduous in enabling schools to replace them - at all levels - with competent practitioners; this practice has also extended to the effective whole-scale replacement of governing bodies in at least two schools. To date, schools placed in special measures have had their powers relating to delegated budgets removed in order to facilitate effective intervention by the LEA in the appointment of new staff and governors. Support has been particularly strong from advisers and other staff within the education standards team, often in association with external consultants about whose work the LEA has good knowledge. This has, for example, helped schools to produce action plans which are effective tools for improvement, or to monitor teaching with a clear and sharp sense of purpose, or to transplant practice from strong to weak schools. Good use has also been made of external funding to improve the poorest buildings, and of other LEA services such as personnel to resolve staffing problems. The school visits confirmed this picture of a well-oiled improvement mechanism, driven by the LEA's education standards team.

71. Wrongly, particularly in view of the heavy commitment made, the LEA has not undertaken any detailed evaluation of the cost effectiveness of the support provided to schools causing concern.

### **Support for school management**

72. Management support has been concentrated in schools causing concern; this support is good. In primary and secondary schools, support for management is generally satisfactory, although there are gaps in coverage in the secondary sector. Omissions in support are linked to a residual reluctance by some secondary schools to acknowledge a need to improve or to participate in LEA-led management development activities. The LEA has a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of management in its schools, shown in a concise audit in the Education Development Plan. This audit, based on a reliable range of evidence, highlighted a need to improve policy forming, planning and evaluation within senior management and team leadership; and accountability and information usage within middle management. Inspection reports showed that around 15 per cent of primary and comprehensive schools were in need of much improvement in management and leadership, a figure significantly higher than found nationally. The LEA was thus right to choose management as one of its seven Education Development Plan priorities. Ninety per cent of schools buy into the service level agreement for curriculum

support and school improvement. Of the 13 schools visited during the inspection which had, at some stage, needed to improve management, marked improvements, and of the LEA's effective efforts to bring this about, were evident in nine of the schools. Moreover, LEA intervention in one primary school has contributed to it becoming, this year, one of the most improved schools in the country.

73. More generally, management support has included sound induction procedures for new headteachers, encouragement for senior managers to engage in national development programmes, meetings for dissemination and discussion, and the provision of curricular and management advice. In particular, recent training for school self-review was highly regarded by primary headteachers; secondary schools will be taking part in this training next term. Advisory support has been concentrated on schools in proportion to their level of need, and has usually been authoritative and useful.

74. The LEA has produced a clear evidence-based analysis of the effectiveness of teaching in its schools. This shows that weaknesses in teaching include lack of organisation and rigour in Key Stage 1, limited subject command in Key Stage 2 and under expectations of pupils in Key Stage 3. There are also difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff in this high-cost region. The Education Development Plan rightly concentrates on these weaknesses through a number of its priorities. Actions to remedy them are sometimes sharp and relevant, although sometimes insufficiently focused on specific needs, for example, the subject knowledge of teachers. Provision beyond Key Stage 3 is limited. Support networks have been set up for some foundation subjects. Given the town's location, schools are within reasonable reach of training and advice from a wide range of providers and consultants, with whom the LEA has productive links. Induction procedures for newly qualified teachers are well organised. Their effectiveness is associated with the successful integration of these teachers into their schools. The LEA has limited resources to support teaching. What exists is carefully and appropriately deployed to national priorities, schools with weaknesses, tackling ineffective teaching, enabling schools to evaluate teaching, and recruiting effective staff, notably in schools causing concern.

### **Support for governors**

75. Overall, the support for school governors is satisfactory. Over 87 per cent of schools buy into governor services, which provides advice, administrative support, a telephone help-line and a training programme. However, during the last academic year, governors found the service less effective than usual in meeting their needs because of staff illness, although cover arrangements were appropriately put in place. An informative and helpful induction package is produced for new governors. A range of training opportunities is offered on themes such as target setting, behaviour management, OFSTED inspections, the early years' curriculum and school improvement. In particular, 'welcome' courses for new governors and training for chairs of governors on the appraisal of headteachers' performance were well received, although some governors felt better use could be made of the existing expertise and experience of those attending. Literacy and numeracy governors have received informative training. Governors expressed concern that, for various reasons, some courses have been under-subscribed and cancelled at a short notice.

However, new strategies are being developed to market the training opportunities more effectively.

76. Governor's feel well informed and, in general, consulted. Opportunities exist for governors to get involved in decision-making, but many choose not to. Termly, the director of education, the lead member for education and senior officers meet chairs of governors to share the LEA's vision and priorities, and to consult on emerging issues. Chairs of governors feel that their views are listened to and are beginning to influence the LEA's policies, for example on SEN.

77. An activity within the Education Development Plan is dedicated to improving the effectiveness of governing bodies. Good progress has been made in half of the eight actions; progress on the remainder, which primarily relate to on-going activities such as provision of information, is generally satisfactory. Nevertheless, the provision of mentor support for new chairs of governors is well behind schedule. Governors have, however, received highly effective advice on the appointment of new headteachers. Clerks to governing bodies are well-briefed on topics such as Fair Funding, infant class sizes and performance management. However, chairs of governors do not receive any notes from advisers after their visits to schools, which reduces their ability to evaluate the effectiveness of their schools.

78. The LEA has taken decisive action with governing bodies of schools placed in special measures. In two such schools, the LEA has helped to replace significant numbers of governors with very committed, effective members of the community who have particular skills to bring to the schools in question. This work by governor services has been particularly effective. More generally, governors' vacancies are high and the LEA has not been able to recruit sufficient new governors, particularly from minority ethnic backgrounds despite a revision to recruitment and selection procedures. The LEA's last campaign succeeded in recruiting 20 new governors but concerns remain in some schools about the availability of suitable volunteers to fill the remaining 33 vacancies.

### **Support for the Key Stage 3 strategy**

79. All secondary schools and the pupil referral units have welcomed the LEA's involvement in the Key Stage 3 pilot. All the consultants have been appointed and those in post have already provided high quality in-service training. One school and the pupil referral units considered the training covered some ground with which they were familiar, inasmuch as institutions with challenging pupils already deploy a wide range of teaching strategies. Nevertheless, there was clear evidence that the strategy is having an impact with, for example, schools reviewing their literacy and numeracy policies and running whole-staff training sessions to raise staff awareness.

80. Understandably, schools were concerned about the amount of training scheduled to take place in school time. Although funding is provided for supply staff, these cannot be recruited in sufficient numbers. Schools welcomed the LEA's consideration of rescheduling training sessions to take place outside school hours.

## **Support for early years**

81. Provision for early years is good. The LEA has been effective in promoting co-operation between the various providers through its significant contribution to the early years development and child care partnership and the work of its advisers in early years' settings. The enthusiastic partnership, characterised by strong teamwork, has produced a series of comprehensive plans for developing early years' education which have been energetically implemented.

82. The current Early Years Childcare Development Plan is a comprehensive document, grounded in an analysis of local needs and well constructed to support the improvement of quality in the various early years' settings, as well as to provide adequate places and access. The plan and its implementation focus appropriately on improving teaching and organisation within the settings supported by specialist staff from the LEA's education standards team, and from social services. Reading now has enough physical provision for part-time places for all four years olds and nine-tenths of three-year olds, thus surpassing the statutory requirements.

83. Earlier inspection reports showed a need to improve standards, teaching and curriculum in some settings. The LEA and the early years partnership are well organised to continue to do this effectively. The LEA's evidence suggests that quality has improved considerably, especially in those voluntary and private settings which previously had little access to LEA expertise. However, the difficulty of recruiting staff to early years settings in the local area acts as a brake on progress.

84. The members' scrutiny committee has recently undertaken a thorough review of early years provision and produced a helpful report with constructive recommendations. Those relating to provision of education psychology and behaviour support have already been implemented. A further recommendation has resulted in a review of admissions being scheduled to begin in the spring term, 2001.

## **Recommendations**

### **In order to raise standards:**

- increase the challenge to secondary schools that have low expectations and are under-performing on a range of fronts to bring them up to the standards of similar schools.

### **In order to ensure value for money:**

- undertake a detailed evaluation of the cost effectiveness of support to schools causing concern.

### **In order to improve the use of performance data to set targets and the use of targets to enhance school improvement:**

- provide schools with comprehensive written guidance on how to set targets and monitor pupils' progress across key stages;



- target support at schools who have difficulty in using performance data effectively. Support should include:
  - further training on the use of data to set targets;
  - support to transfer data electronically;
  - the analysis of performance data by ethnicity;
  - the linkage of targets to the implementation of strategies to raise standards;
- publish performance data that is analysed by ethnicity and includes the name of each school so as to promote discussion on effective practice; and
- ensure schools set appropriately challenging performance targets, based on a rigorous analysis of pupil data.

**To improve the management and governance:**

- provide chairs of governors with appropriate notes following advisory staff visits in order to facilitate their work on evaluating the effectiveness of their schools.

**In order to maximise the attainment of pupils:**

- update the ICT Development Plan to focus on raising the attainment of pupils in ICT capability and in the use of ICT to raise levels of achievement in other subject areas.

## **SECTION THREE**

### **STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT**

#### **Corporate planning**

85. The borough Council has three strategic aims which include 'establishing Reading as a learning city and a stimulating and rewarding place to live and visit'. The borough's strategic document *City 2020* articulates the vision the Council has for the development of Reading and appropriately acknowledges the role of education. Following wide consultation, a community plan is being formulated which will provide a future framework for the development of the Council's work. However, there is some inconsistency in existing planning documentation. Whilst targets in the Council's Best Value Performance Plan are consistent with those in the Education Development Plan, emphases in areas of work differ. However, one particularly good example of Council planning relates to its response to the Macpherson Report. Starting with the Reading Declaration, the Council produced an action plan to which each directorate had to articulate its response and set targets. This year, although the targets for the education and community service directorate focus on the internal, departmental implications of Macpherson, rather than on those for schools, the linkages from corporate aim to, in some cases, individual targets, were well made. Mechanisms for evaluating the effectiveness of corporate plans are under-developed.

86. The Council has introduced a corporate approach to planning. This ensures that each service states, in its service planning documentation, the contribution it will make to corporate aims and identifies linkages with other services and plans. Whilst this planning is still in its infancy, service milestones are produced which will provide a useful basis for evaluating the effectiveness of a service, although there are examples of milestones which are insufficiently targeted at the services' impact on school improvement. A corporate performance management system has recently been introduced and there is a clear appraisal process for staff which links individual performance to service targets.

87. The leadership of the education and community services directorate is shrewd, strategic and well-regarded by the vast majority of schools. The director is seen as supportive of schools and has improved headteacher representation, on for example, the service heads forum, to make Council decisions transparent to them. He has the confidence of most headteachers and is respected for tackling difficult issues such as the closure of a secondary school and the rationalisation of primary places in the north of the borough. In addition, the director has made it clear to headteachers that standards in many schools are too low and must rise: he does challenge under-performance. For example, the LEA has been involved in active management intervention in 13 of its 55 schools, 11 of which have resulted in a change of headship. The LEA has facilitated a turnover of 80 per cent of the staff in one school in special measures.

88. Senior officers have played a significant role in developing members' expertise in relation to educational matters; members themselves acknowledge they had a steep learning curve following Local Government re-organisation. The lead

member for education is well briefed and has visited all but two schools during her term of office. Decisions relating to education, including budget matters, are well informed and timely, with officers detailing the range of options open to members and the advantages/disadvantages of particular courses of action. Whilst there are issues in the borough which could impede developments, the evident all-party support on current education priorities and the lack of inter-party wrangling contributes to effective decision-making by members. A school improvement panel, which comprises three members of the majority party and one from each of the two opposition parties, considers progress on the Education Development Plan, schools' OFSTED reports and the improvements made by schools causing concern.

89. This small authority, which inevitably lacks a full range of expertise and capacity for some tasks, makes good use of external consultants. For example, three consultants are supporting in different ways the development of the LEA's SEN strategy; personnel support is now effectively enhanced by the part-time employment of a consultant; and curriculum support for a range of subjects is available from named consultants.

90. Headteachers recognise that the Council listens to their concerns and responds accordingly. For example, in February 2000, when widespread, significant problems relating to the quality of corporate services became apparent, the chief executive met with headteachers to listen to their concerns. Regular meetings have continued with the chief executive, with service heads present, to review progress and ensure improvements are made.

91. The scrutiny panel with responsibility for education, housing and social services, undertook, as its first major task, a comprehensive review of early years provision in Reading. Despite members' concerns about the ready availability of comparative data and the lack of sufficient dedicated officer support, the review was thorough, based on Best Value principles, and produced clear, sensible recommendations. This work has informed the Council's decision to review the age of admission to reception classes in the next few months. Although the scrutiny panel has produced some valuable work on early years provision, there is a lack of clarity about the role of the scrutiny panel in relation to those undertaking Best Value Reviews.

## **Partnership**

92. The LEA has been effective in building strong and purposeful relationships with a range of partners, leading to some productive collaborative action. For example, in a joint initiative with the LEA, the police are planning to use their powers under the Crime and Disorder Act to combat truancy. Police officers also provide advice to schools on drug abuse, citizenship and combating peer-pressure. One school now has an office in which a police officer is based on a part-time basis. Representatives of the health authority sit, for example, on the SEN review steering group and the newly-formed Pupil Re-integration Panel; and at least 30 schools are registered with the 'Healthy Schools Award' to promote healthy lifestyles.

93. Although there was evidence of close links with other directorates - for example, social services at senior officer level - problems highlighted in the

Education Development Plan relating to the movement of pupils between schools as a result of local re-housing policies, have not been tackled. The resultant mobility of families undermines schools' efforts to raise levels of attainment of, in many cases, the most vulnerable pupils.

94. Good relationships exist with representatives of the Reading Council for Racial Equality (RCRE) who are regularly consulted, for example on the Education Development Plan, are well informed and acknowledge the effective work carried out by the Council in putting ethnic minority issues high on the education agenda. RCRE is one of the panels represented on the school organisation committee.

95. The CBEBP, the LEA and schools have formed a partnership that is very active in its work to raise pupils' achievement in school. Working closely with the LEA and schools, CBEBP supports a wide range of initiatives including work experience for 14-18 year old pupils, a mentoring scheme for Year 12 pupils who cascade their skills on a one-to-one basis to Year 10 pupils and a primary mathematics initiative, 'Water Counts'.

96. The LEA has effective working relationships with its three local dioceses. In particular, there was close liaison in the deft consultation and speedy implementation of the Fresh Start proposals for a voluntary controlled primary school. This reopened as a voluntary aided school, with a consequential increase in the support it would receive from the diocese and a reduction in LEA control. The DfEE cite the school as an exemplar of good practice. All parties are proud of the agreement secured that ensured the school would continue to serve the local community as a neighbourhood school.

97. A good start has been made in developing a corporate strategy for lifelong learning. The lifelong learning plan identifies the key principles and objectives to cover all aspects of learning from birth to death. The planning seeks to respond to local and regional strategies including social inclusion, work-based training, basic skills and widening provision to groups who are less likely to participate in learning.

98. From its inception, the LEA has been committed to working in partnership with schools; this it does effectively. There are appropriate arrangements for headteachers to meet with officers and numerous working parties exist to ensure headteachers are able to make an impact upon decision-making. Headteachers feel well consulted. Nevertheless, structures to facilitate feedback on the work of some groups to headteachers generally are underdeveloped.

### **Management services**

99. Initially, the new LEA failed to provide satisfactory support services to schools. Responses to the school survey highlight weaknesses in payroll, personnel and premises support, which deflected some schools away from their core role of school improvement. This also damaged schools' confidence in the work of the Council. However, school visits during the inspection identified evidence of improvement in customer focus and service standards, as a result of the development and termly monitoring of clearer service level agreements by a regular contact group of headteachers. Other departments of the Council appear to have become more

responsive to schools' particular needs but the basis of their charges needs to be more transparent. Although most of the secondary schools are experienced clients, some of the primary schools still need support in developing their own purchasing and contracting skills. The Council has broken away from its pre Local Government re-organisation culture of direct provision and is expanding its brokerage and partnership role with private providers. More time is needed to confirm that these improvements are embedded in practice and sustainable.

100. The quality of support provided by personnel services has been inconsistent and often poor. Schools have found advice and guidance on day-to-day issues to be unreliable, inconsistent, slow to emerge, and in some cases, simply wrong. However, staff changes in the last six months have led to improvements and buy-back into the service is still 82 per cent. In an effort to emphasise the importance of the provision of accurate, prompt advice, the recent service level agreement includes penalty clauses, which, to date, have not been invoked. Nevertheless, when personnel guidance was part of a coherent support package provided to schools with difficulties, and spearheaded by the LEA's senior management team, good, and sometimes exceptional support, was provided to schools with complex and difficult cases. There is positive liaison with trades unions and professional associations.

101. The majority of schools visited during the inspection reported that difficulties with the recruitment and retention of quality staff are a critical constraint on the pace of raising standards. Many schools were masking staffing problems with temporary appointments, including some that make significant demands on senior staff support and training. Reading has expensive accommodation, high-paid alternative employment for teachers, difficult transport and no higher salary weighting for teachers, whereas fringe and outer London payments start very close by. The Chief Executive is now leading neighbouring authorities in a strategy to tackle this through incentives and possibly accommodation for key workers. The LEA has also been affected by staff problems in critical areas, ironically, including the failure to recruit a recruitment strategy manager jointly with neighbouring LEAs.

102. The payroll service to schools has been unacceptably poor, with constant errors and miscoding. Only half the schools remain in the contract this year. However, the service has listened, become more responsive, improved systems, developed more focused reports for schools and cleared the backlog of work. Schools in the contract reported improvement in the service this term. Moreover, for those schools that opted out, the service negotiated improvements to the schools' contract with the private provider and ensured schools' smooth transition to their elected system.

103. Financial support is provided through a service level agreement purchased by 74 per cent of schools. In their responses to the school survey, over half of schools indicated dissatisfaction with both the support for planning and control of schools' budgets, and with the accuracy of financial information. Since then, the section has become better focused and is overcoming the variability in the quality of work due to the loss of some experienced staff. The LEA provides timely information on indicative and actual budgets. School budgets are closely monitored. All schools with surpluses over five per cent have submitted plans to show how their surpluses are to be spent and the one secondary school with a substantial deficit has an appropriate

five-year recovery plan. All schools have cheque books and effective new financial ICT systems. The LEA works closely and effectively with a bursars' group which meets regularly to review systems, receive up-to-date information and highlight concerns. Support is given to schools to manage contracts.

104. To date, delegation has been withdrawn from all schools in special measures enabling the LEA to manage their budgets and staffing proactively. Budgets are restored when schools are removed from special measures and the school's staffing, skills and capacity are secure, generally after a new headteacher and governors have been appointed.

## **Recommendations**

### **In order to achieve Best Value and support school improvement:**

- review all service level agreements for traded services to ensure that they are:
  - focused to support school improvement;
  - tailored to meet schools' varying needs;
  - transparent, with clear standards and differentiated pricing and services; and
  - subject to systematic evaluation of performance by schools;
- develop and put in place service level agreements for centrally retained services that clarify to schools:
  - their entitlement, which may be differentiated;
  - service standards and costs, including any charges by central departments;  
and
  - are subject to systematic evaluation of performance by schools;
- secure a reliable and effective personnel service for schools, either through sustained improvement to the existing service, or brokerage with other providers.

## **SECTION FOUR**

### **SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL PROVISION**

#### **Strategy**

105. The borough Council inherited a challenging and costly situation with regard to supporting pupils with special educational needs (SEN) which does not reflect the needs of the new LEA. At Local Government re-organisation:

- 860 pupils had a statement of special educational need; the number had risen to 943 by September 1999;
- the proportion of pupils with a statement for SEN was twice the national average;
- fifty-one per cent of pupils with statements were placed in special schools;
- forty-five per cent of Reading's pupils with statements attended schools outside the borough;
- the detailed needs for the SEN pupils the borough was to inherit were not known or available for planning purposes prior to Local Government re-organisation.

106. The LEA is firmly committed to tackling the extensive range of SEN issues with which it was presented. Rightly, the LEA swiftly initiated a comprehensive and thorough consultation exercise to review provision and set up four task groups to look at the needs of specific aspects of SEN. In addition, two external consultants have been appropriately engaged to assess the priorities for future development. Their work includes reviews of special schools and resourced provision; the criteria for statutory assessment; and SEN funding within the principles of Fair Funding. In 1999, the LEA produced a clear policy statement that articulated its philosophy, aims, priorities and success criteria, although it did not include any explicit reference to the SEN Code of Practice and the Government's programme for action for SEN. However, visits to schools during the inspection illustrated that the LEA has successfully communicated, both to headteachers and SEN co-ordinators, its commitment to inclusion, early intervention, delegation of SEN funds, a need to reduce out-of-borough placements and the need for a continuum of provision to meet pupils' varying needs. The schools visited understood and supported the aims of the LEA's strategy.

107. The LEA is committed to reducing the number of placements out of borough by increasing in-borough provision in special schools, resource bases and appropriate mainstream provision. A consultant has recently completed a useful report for the LEA on the resourced units required to cater for the needs of statemented pupils in Reading. The report will form the basis of more detailed consultation with schools. Currently, there are resourced bases in primary schools for pupils with sensory impairments; and in three secondary schools for pupils with Asperger's syndrome, visual impairment and those with moderate learning difficulties. The LEA lacks sufficient provision for pupils with severe learning difficulties. On an individual basis, the resource centres are well managed, but there is no cohesive approach to the LEA's support for these centres and little formal monitoring and evaluation of their effectiveness. All but seven of the LEA's primary schools buy into support from the language and literacy centres which provide good

support for pupils with specific learning difficulties and those with more complex literacy needs.

### **Statutory obligations**

108. The administration of SEN is well managed, with the assessment, preparation and provision for SEN statements completed in a diligent and efficient manner. A good response is made to the completion of statements within statutory time-limits and in the application of the Code of Practice for SEN, with the authority achieving 89 per cent with exceptions. The management of annual reviews by schools is closely monitored and an example was given during the inspection of constructive advice and support being provided to a school that had fallen behind with its reviews.

109. Statements are of good quality and matched to pupils' needs. They are well-written with specific guidance to support teachers in the production of individual education plans and the monitoring of realistic and measurable progress targets. LEA officers attend statutory annual reviews at transition stages and where contentious cases are highlighted.

110. The LEA has been successful both in increasing the number of discontinued statements and in reducing the number of pupils statemented in order to redirect funds into schools to support early intervention strategies. During the inspection, £200,000 of re-directed funding was distributed to schools to facilitate early intervention strategies on the basis of a formula previously discussed with, and endorsed by, headteachers. Targets have been set to reduce the number of statements to the national norm.

111. There are strong and well established relationships with voluntary agencies and with parents that are reflected in a joint discussion forum and effective parent partnership services. The authority has low numbers of cases for arbitration.

### **Improvement and value for money**

112. Educational psychologists are highly regarded by schools and provide good support to schools and SEN co-ordinators (SENCOs). They are responsive to schools' needs, helpful and able to provide useful advice on teaching strategies to adopt with particular pupils. Education psychologists' time is allocated on the basis of an appropriate formula, and all but two of the schools visited considered they had a sufficient allocation of time to meet their needs.

113. Pre-school intervention and sensory provision are well established services that contribute to early intervention targets, with evidence of pockets of good multi-disciplinary responses to meet individual need. Schools visited reported good support for hearing impaired and visually impaired pupils which included guidance for staff on teaching strategies, help with the production of individual education plans and, as necessary, equipment maintenance. There are currently no protocols for working with the health authority and the social services department which has resulted, for example, in the education budget wholly funding improvements to facilities in one school for pupils with SEN which should have properly been shared with other services.



114. There are insufficient SEN training opportunities. Training of mainstream and special school staff has been limited to date, although the recent appointment of the SEN adviser, following a period when no appointment was possible, is expected to rectify this. There is no provision for accredited courses related to the SENCO standards and only limited access to courses that credit SEN specialist standards. Training for SEN governors has also been insufficient. Nevertheless, learning support assistants in one school visited had benefited from attending a City and Guilds accredited course. At the present time, schools have not received advice or training on early intervention strategies.

115. The amount of money retained centrally for SEN, at £162 per pupil, is similar to other authorities and to the national average of £157 per pupil. The current procedure for identifying pupils' needs and the costing of appropriate provision is overly complex (it allows for 24 different types of funding, when around seven is more usually found) and does not result in a fair, transparent and equitable allocation of resources between mainstream and special schools. This is the subject of one of the current SEN consultations. Currently, SEN funding delegated to schools is allocated on the basis of free school meals, rather than, more appropriately, on pupils' additional educational needs. Overall, the service provides satisfactory value for money.

## **Recommendations**

### **In order to improve the effectiveness of special educational provision:**

- within a clear timeframe, implement the recommendations from the SEN review and consultation to ensure a continuum of provision that is transparent, easily understood through clear criteria for all learning and disability groups, with equitable funding of provision and underpinned with early intervention strategies;
- provide a comprehensive SEN training programme, with an appropriate range of accredited courses, for SEN co-ordinators, teachers, learning support assistants and governors;
- develop arrangements to monitor and evaluate the allocation and effectiveness of delegated SEN funding; and
- initiate the development of protocols with the health authority and the social services department to underpin the funding of resources and facilities for pupils with SEN.



## **SECTION FIVE**

### **ACCESS**

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

116. School place planning is well managed. In its first two years, the Council has been decisive in tackling several difficult issues unresolved by the previous LEA and outstanding for some time. The LEA has worked effectively with schools, dioceses, neighbouring LEAs and other local interest groups on school places matters. The school organisation committee is well briefed and makes decisions following thorough consultation.

117. The boundary of the LEA does not coincide with established secondary school catchment areas. Since Local Government re-organisation, historical catchment areas have been maintained so there are strong primary and secondary links between schools in Reading and those in the three neighbouring LEAs. The two selective grammar schools serve all Berkshire and take fewer than 20 per cent of pupils from Reading. Twenty schools receive additional funding for comparatively high levels of pupil mobility (i.e. over ten per cent of the school population). This is mainly due to the borough's re-housing policies, a small number of refugees and parents studying at the university or working on short-term contracts with multinational companies.

118. Within these constraints, the school organisation plan includes accurate roll projections and sets out a framework that not only tackles surplus places and aligns provision to population, but also contributes to the strategy for reducing the number of schools causing concern. The current SEN review is likely to result in changes and relocation of special schools and the establishment of more primary mainstream SEN units.

119. Currently, there are only four per cent of surplus places in the primary sector. Following effective, but not protracted, consultation, the LEA has reviewed primary school provision in the north of the borough. This has resulted in the provision of 234 additional places and more effective designated areas for seven primary schools. Plans to amalgamate an infant and primary school are underway. A review of primary provision in central Reading will be undertaken early in 2001. This will resolve the mismatch of surplus places and old inadequate buildings within a context of changing demography, and maximise the capital opportunities of proposed new housing developments.

120. There are 13 per cent surplus places in secondary schools; this will reduce to nine per cent in 2002 upon the planned closure of one secondary school and the expansion of the neighbouring foundation technology college.

121. The provision of sixth form places is uneconomical, inefficient and of limited educational benefit. For example, in 1999, the results for pupils taking two or more A levels, compared with like schools, placed five of the secondary schools in the bottom 25 per cent. All eight secondary schools have sixth forms with a total sixth form population of 1032 pupils (in September 2000) although one of these schools is

scheduled for closure. The two grammar schools have over 200 pupils each but three of the schools have fewer than 60 pupils each, despite rising numbers. This arrangement is costly and diverts funding away from other priority areas. The establishment of the Berkshire Learning Skills Council provides an appropriate opportunity for the LEA, with schools and partners, to review and improve the cost effectiveness of provision.

### **Admissions to schools**

122. Admission arrangements are effective and meet all statutory requirements. The LEA administers admissions to all community and voluntary schools and liaises appropriately with the foundation schools and those in other LEAs. Information to parents is clear and is available on the Council website. The former Berkshire LEAs have maintained their secondary 'designated appropriate areas' and operate an effective common secondary transfer and preference system. At secondary transfer, 98 per cent of first preferences are successful, including the two-fifths of Reading pupils who attend secondary schools in other LEAs.

123. Following consultation, the LEA has improved and rationalised entry and admissions arrangements for reception classes and ensured all schools adhere to them. Currently, there are reception intakes each term but parents are offered the places for all three intakes the previous March. Most schools take pupils the term after they are five, but following the recent scrutiny review of early years, the Council is reviewing whether to change to one or two points of entry. This would entail more pupils starting school as rising fives. Primary schools strongly support this change provided it is adequately resourced; nevertheless, it would necessitate the rationalisation of early years provision.

124. Ten community primary schools are oversubscribed. The LEA has reduced the number and success of appeals through improvements to policies and catchment areas, and good training for members of the appeals committee.

### **Property management**

125. The LEA inherited some buildings in serious disrepair and more that are simply shabby and unpleasant workplaces for adults and pupils. The Asset Management Plan quantifies this and sets a clear framework for repairs based on the condition survey gap estimated to be £17m. In addition, the cost of work to improve specialist facilities - based on suitability surveys - optimise the rationalisation of school places, including the outcomes of the SEN review, would require further funding of up to £15m. Rightly, PFI and other partnerships are being investigated. In addition to capital spending, the LEA boosted delegated funding by £500,000 in 2000-01 for the repair and maintenance of school buildings.

126. The LEA has shared the asset management information with schools and some are using it to assist their own planning, including the implementation of building projects joint-funded by the LEA and schools themselves. Some schools, including foundation schools, welcome this autonomy and have the internal management capacity to maximise the opportunities presented. Other schools, particularly smaller primary schools, need more support for asset management

planning; currently they lack the confidence and capacity to be effective managers of the delegated responsibility and accompanying resources. Understandably, some schools are unwilling to commit their own resources, say to redecoration, given the uncertainty about the programming of capital, the scale of structural building problems, school reorganisation and capital investment

127. Premises support from the direct service organisation has been of extremely poor quality and totally unacceptable. On one occasion, the worst work had to be demolished and rebuilt. It has recently improved and is now satisfactory. In 1999-2000, the then LEA maintained schools agreed to pool their planned maintenance budgets through a building maintenance partnership, including headteacher representatives, which prioritised work. Not all works were completed as programmed and some charges did not arrive until after the delegation of repairs and maintenance, leaving schools to foot the bill. Schools were subsequently compensated through contingency funding. From 2000, schools took on their full delegated responsibilities and 70 per cent still purchase a building maintenance service through a new service level agreement. The direct service organisation is under new management which is well aware the service must improve. Recent improvements include a helpdesk, the establishment of performance management arrangements, the completion of the backlog of repairs and provision of clearly priced estimates. The senior manager has visited every school over the past six months to discuss their needs and aims to develop a one-stop shop with a flexible range of services and levels. Evidence from schools collected during the inspection, confirmed improvements in the quality of the service, increased responsiveness and more competitive costs.

128. Good support is provided to schools by the Council's technical client team which assists schools in tendering and provide advice on alternative contractors.

### **Attendance**

129. Levels of attendance in both primary and secondary schools are close to the national average, although the proportion of unauthorised absence in primary schools is twice that found nationally. There has been little change in overall levels of attendance in the last few years, although there has been some success in reducing levels of unauthorised absence in primary schools, which at 0.92 per cent is still above the LEA target for 1999/2000 of 0.8 per cent. Good progress has been made in tackling unauthorised absences in secondary schools; the percentage has reduced from 1.2 per cent in 1998/9 to 0.76 per cent in 1999/2000, which betters the 2002 target of 0.9 per cent and is less than the national average.

130. Since Reading became a unitary authority, the work of the education welfare service has been appropriately refocused with a renewed emphasis on improving levels of attendance. Schools receive effectively differentiated support related to their needs and all the schools visited were positive about the work of their named education welfare officer. Some particularly successful work has been undertaken with schools whose attendance levels are low; in these instances, the education welfare officer has suggested and overseen the implementation of a wide range of strategies to improve attendance, including reward systems and first day response. Clear guidance has been provided to schools about the respective roles and

responsibilities of the school, education welfare officer and education welfare service, in raising levels of attendance. The service has also been prepared to use its full range of powers including case conferences, attendance panels and the prosecution of parents of non-attenders.

131. Good examples were found of effective and productive liaison between the education welfare service and other partners including the service that supports children out of school (ECOS) and the police, who undertake a weekly city centre truancy patrol. The service has also been commended on its draft cross-border protocol for school attendance and exclusions which clarifies responsibilities for pupils educated in a different authority from that in which they live.

132. Nevertheless, some aspects of the performance management of the service are weak. The service's development plan for 1999/2000 was primarily, but not exclusively, concerned with the structure of the service and there were no links to activities detailed in the Education Development Plan. The actions detailed within the Education Development Plan are sensible, and have, in the main, been implemented. However, schools do not have any ownership of the LEA's unauthorised absence targets and the actions in the Plan are not sufficiently targeted at the schools or the pupils who most need support, despite evidence of some effective practice. Schools do not set quantitative attendance targets, although it is planned that these will be incorporated into service level agreements, about which schools are currently being consulted from April 2001.

133. Although the service is quite generously staffed, most work term-time only in order to provide greater efficiency in the deployment of resources. Overall, the service provides satisfactory value for money.

### **Behaviour support**

134. The LEA is making considerable strides in maximising the effectiveness of its primary behaviour support team and recent initiatives with secondary schools to tackle the high level of permanent exclusion that has been prevalent for some years. Prior to Local Government re-organisation, the average number of pupils permanently excluded from Reading schools was 44. This figure reached an all time high in 1998/9 with 56 permanent exclusions, well over the national average for secondary schools. In 1999/2000, the deployment of a number of range of strategies has resulted in 38 permanent exclusions, which although a good reduction, is above the 1999/2000 target of 31. There has also been a small reduction in the number of fixed term exclusions, but these are still too high.

135. The original Behaviour Support Plan was drawn up following extensive consultation with schools and provided clear guidance to the range and type of provision and support available. The plan anticipated national changes, with an appropriate emphasis on multi-agency working which is becoming an effective feature of provision within Reading. At the same time, headteachers were involved with devising the Education Development Plan which includes a priority dedicated to 'Improving the Management of Pupils' Behaviour'. The Behaviour Support Plan has been reviewed and an evaluation report published recently which rightly acknowledges the good progress made on the Education Development Plan's

activities. In particular, effective training has been provided to teachers, learning support assistants and lunchtime supervisors on, for example, behaviour management. Useful guidance has also been produced to enable schools to draw up behaviour policies.

136. Behaviour support to primary schools is a strength of the LEA. Over 90 per cent of primary schools considered provision of behaviour support services to be at least satisfactory, and in 60 per cent of cases, good or very good. The Behaviour Support Service, which on Local Government re-organisation, was conceived as a cross-phase service, modified its focus when proposals for behaviour support failed to engage active support from the majority of Reading's secondary schools. Primary schools consider the behaviour support team to be effective and responsive to their needs. As well as providing a comprehensive training programme tailored to meet the needs of individual schools, the team observe and monitor the behaviour of challenging pupils and advise staff on strategies to deploy. In one school, the very effective support provided to five pupils had reduced the need for statementing - a clear example of the success of the LEA's policy of early intervention. Schools also welcomed the assistance provided on drawing up and implementing pastoral support programmes, including the organisation and minuting of meetings.

137. The divergent nature of secondary schools in Reading made it difficult to agree a consensus on the nature of the behaviour support to be provided by the LEA. Support currently provided is of two kinds. Firstly, the allocation secured by the LEA for pupil retention grant money has been fully delegated to five secondary schools to develop their own strategies to reduce fixed term and permanent exclusions; schools have received between £33,000 and £58,000. Another secondary school has received a substantial grant for a two-year period from the Home Office, match funded by the LEA, for a crime reduction project to tackle truancy and disaffection through multi-agency work and internal strategies. At this stage, there are indications of some success in the use of these approaches to reduce permanent exclusions. However, schools in receipt of pupil retention grant monies have not set quantitative targets by which the various schemes can be evaluated, although money is clawed back from the grant following the permanent exclusion of a pupil.

138. Secondly, the LEA has set up, effective from September 2000, a pupil re-integration panel, with representatives of all secondary schools, to co-ordinate support for individual disaffected pupils and those displaying behavioural difficulties. This includes the organisation of 'managed moves' to alternative schools, provision of education for those excluded from school, admission to the LEA's pupil referral units and the monitoring of the effectiveness of schools' use of the pupil retention grant. In addition, the newly appointed pupil re-integration and exclusion officer is co-ordinating multi-agency support to vulnerable pupils referred to her by schools. It is too early to evaluate the effectiveness of this work, but schools were enthusiastic about recent developments.

## **Provision of education otherwise than at school**

139. At Local Government re-organisation, the LEA inherited not only limited provision for Reading pupils out of school, but monitoring arrangements that had fallen into disuse. The practice of taking pupils off roll without ensuring that the child had an alternative placement was widespread. The new LEA faced considerable challenges. The ECOS service has the principal objective to provide statutory education for pupils up to school leaving age who are not attending a mainstream or special school. This service provides education for children in hospital, school phobics, pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers, and those permanently excluded from school. By July 1999, 272 pupils were using the ECOS service, of which 92 had been permanently excluded from school.

140. Following an independent consultant's report, published in September 1999 and the requirement to put in place full time provision for all pupils not in school by September 2002, the ECOS service has been restructured. A clear and appropriately detailed action and development plan has been drawn up to enable statutory requirements to be met.

141. The service is well led and good progress is being made on implementing the action plan. Currently, only nine pupils receive the minimum entitlement provided by the service of four hours home tuition. On average, pupils receive 10 hours per week, although over one-fifth of the pupils receive at least 12.5 hours per week. Overall, provision is inadequate. However, good links are being made with a range of outside agencies to enable full-time provision or equivalent to be in place by 2002. Year 9 pupils are prepared for their SATs and Key Stage 4 pupils are prepared for examination in a range of GCSE subjects. Home teachers are well managed and their work regularly monitored; they are carefully matched to individual pupils and programmes of work provided to maximise pupils' educational opportunities.

142. There are two pupil referral units; one caters for pregnant schoolgirls, young mothers and school phobics; and the other provides teaching sessions for GCSE courses. The PRUs are well supported by the LEA, having access to an educational psychologist as necessary and an educational welfare officer on a weekly basis. However, progress in re-housing one of the poorly accommodated PRUs (which also has inadequate ICT facilities limiting the ability to quickly exchange information with pupils' host schools) has been delayed by a wait for planning permission.

143. In addition to the ECOS service, the LEA in partnership with British Gas, has funded a successful and nationally recognised project for 50 Year 11 disaffected pupils. Set up in 1998, the 'CRED' Project was designed to provide a bridge between school and work for disillusioned pupils about to commence their last year at school. Secondary schools, who invite pupils to attend the Project, are enthusiastic about its effectiveness. Pupils participate in two days work experience a week and study for GNVQs for the remainder of the time, making good use of the ICT facilities provided for their benefit. Attendance is good and rarely less than 90 per cent.

144. Some pupils receive too little provision; this apart, the service is effective.

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



145. At Local Government re-organisation, Reading Council formally adopted Berkshire's child protection procedures. Consequently, Reading's area child protection committee (ACPC) did not come formally into existence until April 1999. Nevertheless, a revised and comprehensive handbook detailing child protection procedures has been issued to schools. Arrangements to develop a child protection policy for the LEA's schools have been too slow and are still in their infancy. This is due primarily to a lack of consensus among ACPC representatives as to whether the six unitary authorities should work together on joint policies and procedures or each Council develop their own. Although there has been no comprehensive staff training programme managed by the LEA, the Reading area child protection committee, well supported by a senior officer in the LEA and primary headteacher, offers a good range of appropriate training opportunities. These, and others offered by social services, have however, not been well supported by school staff. Although the LEA has a list of designated teachers with responsibility in schools for child protection issues, the LEA does not have up-to-date records of the training these teachers have received.

146. Since Local Government re-organisation, there has been an improvement in health and safety guidance and support to schools. A comprehensive health and safety policy handbook has been issued to all schools with guidance on the completion of risk assessments. Training is on offer and is currently being reviewed to focus on the needs of schools. Professional associations reported a rapid and effective response to issues raised in schools. Headteachers are represented on the health and safety working group and there are two-yearly cycle of visits to schools.

### **Children in public care**

147. The Council has a strong commitment to supporting the 131 children in its care and satisfactorily fulfils its responsibilities. A multi-disciplinary parent panel, consisting of elected members and officers, has been established to review the Council's provision for children in public care and receive regular reports on pupils' attainment, attendance and exclusions. Good practice exists; for example, at a recent meeting, pupils' views on decision-making, schoolwork, discipline and sanctions were elicited and acted upon to improve their welfare. Five primary schools participate in a multi-agency project led by a voluntary organisation and targeted at pupils in Years 3-6 who are in the public care system or at risk of exclusion. Two of these schools were visited as part of the inspection and were enthusiastic about the impact of this work.

148. The school survey and visits to schools during the inspection shows that more work needs to be done to secure a better understanding by schools of their role and responsibilities related to children in public care. Schools receive appropriate information including changes in their public care status when a looked after child is admitted. Some schools' pastoral and special needs staff have attended pupils' statutory six monthly reviews carried out by social services. However, the LEA has not yet ensured that all schools nominate a teacher with clear responsibility for pupils in public care, nor has it provided appropriate training to promote and monitor educational attainment. The borough has been proactive in developing personal education plans, prior to the recent publication of national guidance. A small task

group is currently refining the documentation and further development work on the implementation of the guidance is being conducted, appropriately, through the cross-member parenting panel group.

149. Although good progress has been made by the social services in developing, maintaining and analysing a comprehensive database to record pupils' placement, their attainment at the end of each key stage, attendance and exclusion patterns, the database is not consistent with that of the LEA. Nevertheless, data are exchanged. This year, 64 per cent of pupils in public care achieved at least one GCSE grade, exceeding the LEA's 2000 target.

### **Ethnic minority children**

150. The LEA has a higher than average proportion of ethnic minority pupils who are concentrated in a core of 12-15 schools. The EMTAG Action Plan is a comprehensive document which includes a detailed breakdown of achievement by ethnicity throughout the key stages; however, unlike the 1998 targets, the targets for 2000 are not based upon the prior attainment of individual pupils. In addition, some of the targets in the EMTAG plan are inconsistent with those in the Education Development Plan, which also makes scant reference to targeting resources to raise the attainment of lower achieving ethnic groups. In contrast, the Council has included clear targets for the achievement of ethnic minority pupils in its Best Value Performance Plan.

151. The total budget allocated by the Council significantly exceeds that required to secure EMTAG funding, demonstrating members' commitment to raising the standards of attainment of ethnic minority pupils. Headteachers were consulted on the allocation of EMTAG funding which is appropriately distributed according to a needs-led formula. Over 95 per cent of the funding is delegated to schools, the rest being used to provide peripatetic support to individual ethnic minority pupils who are in schools that do not qualify for EMTAG funding.

152. Support for the needs of ethnic minority pupils was considered to be at least satisfactory by 87 per cent of primary schools responding to the pre-inspection survey. This is confirmed by the very positive comments made in schools' inspection reports about the quality of support given to these pupils from grant-funded staff. LEA support for ethnic minority pupils is effective and focused on primary schools. All but two schools buy into the service. Support includes English as an additional language (EAL), training for the literacy hour, training of EMTAG staff and access to a resource bank which includes big books. Support for the 19 refugee pupils is also effective; they receive peripatetic language support, organised by the LEA, using a range of expertise including students at the university and multi-agency work.

153. Support for the small number of Travellers, who are mainly Gypsies, is satisfactory. Schools who have traveller children are encouraged to use resources produced by the Traveller education service, which covers the six ex-Berkshire authorities. Recent discussions between the Traveller education service, which has a dedicated education welfare officer, and the LEA's education welfare service, have clarified respective responsibilities.

## **Gifted and talented**

154. There is some effective provision for able pupils but it is limited and lacks co-ordination by the LEA. Recently, the grammar schools have extended provision by running successful summer schools for able pupils in Years 6 and 7. In addition, a few individual schools run their own initiatives for example 'master classes' for pupils in Year 6 and accelerating the most able pupils by one year. A recent meeting for schools, co-ordinated by the LEA, highlighted current policies to raise standards among gifted and talented pupils and identified a range of means by which schools and the LEA could improve provision. This represents a productive start to improving and spreading this work, which is particularly important given the relatively low standards of attainment in Reading and the scant reference to enhancing provision for able pupils in the Education Development Plan.

## **Measures to combat racism**

155. The Council has made a comprehensive response to the report of the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence (the Macpherson report). In particular, the Council published its *Reading Declaration*, a charter for equality in Reading's Public Services and Governance which succinctly articulates the borough's principles and values. Following this, the Council has produced an action plan that identifies current practice, future action, clear time-scales and the responsibility of directorates to implement developments. The education and community services equalities action plan 2000-1 details comprehensively the actions that are required to be taken by the directorate to implement the Reading Declaration. However, the plan is not sufficiently focused on raising the achievement of ethnic minority pupils in schools, nor indeed, on raising schools' awareness of their contribution to this work. The plan includes appropriate actions to establish arrangements for monitoring racist incidents in schools, scheduled to be in place by the end of 2000; this is too late. Only two schools visited currently record racist incidents and none report them to the LEA.

## **Social inclusion**

156. The LEA has a clearly articulated school inclusion strategy which aims to develop support to schools to retain disaffected pupils and to facilitate the swift placement of pupils following exclusion. However, the strategy does not embrace the parallel work being undertaken to facilitate the inclusion of SEN pupils, nor those with additional educational needs. This is a mistake. Nevertheless, schools are clear that social inclusion is high on the LEA's agenda and have some notion of the implications for them. Although the school inclusion strategy focuses too narrowly on disaffected and excluded pupils, in reality the commitment to social inclusion underpins much of the LEA's practice.

## **Recommendations**

**In order to maximise the achievement of able pupils, schools should be supported in:**

- developing policies, procedures and partnerships to identify and provide for able pupils.

**In order to improve the condition of school buildings:**

- increase the level of investment in school building maintenance; and
- robustly monitor the quality of premises support provided to schools from the direct service organisation to ensure recent improvements are maintained and bettered.

**In order to ensure all child protection procedures are up to date:**

- ensure an up-to-date log is maintained of the training designated teachers with responsibility for child protection have received, and that gaps in provision are filled.

**In order to promote, monitor and raise the educational attainment of pupils in public care:**

- provide appropriate guidance and training to designated staff and evaluate its impact.

**In order to promote social inclusion and reduce exclusions from school:**

- quantitative targets should be set for each secondary school so as to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the allocation of pupil retention grant funding.
- draw up an overarching social inclusion strategy to incorporate all aspects of inclusion.

**In order to combat racism comply with the recommendations of the Macpherson report:**

- details of racist incidents occurring in schools should be collected and monitored by the LEA and, where appropriate, guidance, support and advice provided to schools.

**In order to maximise the effectiveness of resources:**

- review the provision of sixth form places, in consultation with the Berkshire Learning Skills Council, schools and other partners, so as to provide a cost-effective arrangement which provides post-16 pupils with a broad range of curricular opportunities.

## **APPENDIX**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **In order to improve the effectiveness of the school improvement strategy:**

- in consultation with headteachers, amend the Education Development Plan and the arrangements for evaluating its effectiveness to:
  - incorporate activities targeted at raising the achievement of ethnic minority pupils, pupils in public care and those who experience frequent changes of school;
  - ensure all activities are clearly focused upon groups of pupils and schools who most need support;
  - ensure success criteria are specific and measurable; and
  - ensure strategies for monitoring the progress and impact of the Plan are robust and incorporate the views of stakeholders.

#### **In order to ensure that the Council secures Best Value and promotes continuous improvement:**

- evaluate Best Value reviews carried out so far to inform future practice in relation to:
  - maximising the effectiveness of officers' and members' time when carrying out Best Value reviews and/or the scrutiny function; and
  - ensuring the Best Value reviews are of sufficient breadth to have a real impact on the services experienced by users.

#### **In order to raise standards:**

- increase the challenge to secondary schools that have low expectations and are under-performing on a range of fronts to bring them up to the standards of similar schools.

#### **In order to ensure value for money:**

- undertake a detailed evaluation of the cost effectiveness of support to schools causing concern.

#### **In order to improve the use of performance data to set targets and the use of targets to enhance school improvement:**

- provide schools with comprehensive written guidance on how to set targets and monitor pupils' progress across key stages;
- target support at schools who have difficulty in using performance data effectively. Support should include:
  - further training on the use of data to set targets;

- support to transfer data electronically;
- the analysis of performance data by ethnicity;
- the linkage of targets to the implementation of strategies to raise standards;
- publish performance data that is analysed by ethnicity and includes the name of each school so as to promote discussion on effective practice; and
- ensure schools set appropriately challenging performance targets, based on a rigorous analysis of pupil data.

**To improve the management and governance:**

- provide chairs of governors with appropriate notes following advisory staff visits in order to facilitate their work on evaluating the effectiveness of their schools.

**In order to maximise the attainment of pupils:**

- update the ICT Development Plan to focus on raising the attainment of pupils in ICT capability and in the use of ICT to raise levels of achievement in other subject areas.

**In order to achieve Best Value and support school improvement:**

- review all service level agreements for traded services to ensure that they are:
  - focused to support school improvement;
  - tailored to meet schools' varying needs;
  - transparent, with clear standards and differentiated pricing and services;
  - subject to systematic evaluation of performance by schools;
- develop and put in place service level agreements for centrally retained services that clarify to schools:
  - their entitlement, which may be differentiated;
  - service standards and costs, including any charges by central departments; and
  - are subject to systematic evaluation of performance by schools;
- secure a reliable and effective personnel service for schools, either through sustained improvement to the existing service, or brokerage with other providers.

**In order to improve the effectiveness of special educational provision:**

- within a clear timeframe, implement the recommendations from the SEN review and consultation to ensure a continuum of provision that is transparent, easily understood through clear criteria for all learning and disability groups, with equitable funding of provision and underpinned with early intervention strategies;

- provide a comprehensive SEN training programme, with an appropriate range of accredited courses, for SEN co-ordinators, teachers, learning support assistants and governors;
- develop arrangements to monitor and evaluate the allocation and effectiveness of delegated SEN funding; and
- initiate the development of protocols with the health authority and the social services department to underpin the funding of resources and facilities for pupils with SEN.

**In order to maximise the achievement of able pupils, schools should be supported in:**

- developing policies, procedures and partnerships to identify and provide for able pupils.

**In order to improve the condition of school buildings:**

- increase the level of investment in school building maintenance; and
- robustly monitor the quality of premises support provided to schools from the direct service organisation to ensure recent improvements are maintained and bettered.

**In order to ensure all child protection procedures are up to date:**

- ensure an up-to-date log is maintained of the training designated teachers with responsibility for child protection have received, and that gaps in provision are filled.

**In order to promote, monitor and raise the educational attainment of pupils in public care:**

- provide appropriate guidance and training to designated staff and evaluate its impact.

**In order to promote social inclusion and reduce exclusions from school:**

- quantitative targets should be set for each secondary school so as to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the allocation of pupil retention grant funding.
- draw up an overarching social inclusion strategy to incorporate all aspects of inclusion.

**In order to combat racism comply with the recommendations of the Macpherson report:**

- details of racist incidents occurring in schools should be collected and monitored by the LEA and, where appropriate, guidance, support and advice provided to schools.

**In order to maximise the effectiveness of resources:**

- review the provision of sixth form places, in consultation with the Berkshire Learning Skills Council, schools and other partners, so as to provide a cost-effective arrangement which provides post-16 pupils with a broad range of curricular opportunities.



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