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APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection was carried out by OFSTED in conjunction with the Audit Commission under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The inspection used the Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities (September 2000) which focuses on the effectiveness of local education authority (LEA) work to support school improvement. The inspection also took account of the Local Government Act 1999, insofar as it relates to work undertaken by the LEA on Best Value.

2. The inspection was partly based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA, on school inspection information and audit reports, on documentation and discussions with LEA elected members, focus groups of headteachers and governors, staff in the department of education and leisure services and in other Council departments and representatives of the LEA's partners. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on aspects of the LEA's work was circulated to all its schools. The response rate was 91 per cent.

3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to 12 primary schools, five secondary schools and two special schools. The visits tested the views of headteachers and other staff on the key aspects of the LEA's strategy. The visits also considered whether the support which is provided by the LEA contributes, where appropriate, to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in the school, and provides value for money. The inspection also took account of relevant evidence from Her Majesty's Inspector's national monitoring work.

COMMENTARY

4. Oldham is a mainly urban borough, lying to the north-east of Manchester. It suffers from considerable deprivation, which is particularly concentrated in the central areas. Just over one-fifth of school pupils are from minority ethnic groups.

5. Overall school performance is below the national average, but is improving at faster than the national rate. Improvement has been particularly rapid between 1998 and 2000.

6. Much of the credit for the improving standards must go to the schools. However, the LEA has helped to provide the right climate and the impetus for improvement. Over the last four years, the LEA has been successful in improving its challenge and support to schools. The Education Development Plan provides a good base from which to promote school improvement. Locally devised school improvement projects provide a very effective and flexible way of giving individual schools the support they need.

7. Consultation with schools has been strengthened and is good, forming the basis for a strong partnership. Additionally, the Oldham Partnership Board facilitates good partnership working with external agencies, and has brought extra resources to schools which are well targeted.

8. Oldham Council has traditionally given priority to spending on education, and delegation to schools is higher than the metropolitan average. There is broad agreement amongst members on educational priorities. Arrangements for members to consider more fully issues relating to standards in schools are being strengthened. Overall, the leadership given by members, the chief education officer, and other senior officers is sound.

9. The LEA performs almost all of its functions at least satisfactorily. Strengths clearly outweigh weaknesses. The following functions are performed particularly effectively:

- support for numeracy and literacy;
- support for school management;
- support to governors;
- support for financial management and personnel;
- support for ethnic minorities including Travellers;
- planning for school places;
- asset management planning and the investment in new schools;
- support for early years education; and
- strong partnership with schools.

10. The following functions are not exercised adequately:

- meeting statutory requirements for the timely production of statements of special educational need;

- support for attendance and behaviour;
- support for children in public care; and
- the approach to Best Value.

11. The lack of sufficient support for attendance and behaviour, particularly in the primary phase, makes it harder for schools to raise standards. Although there are some strengths in the area of support for special educational needs, such as the extensive delegation of resources to schools over a number of years, there are also weaker elements. These include the partnership with parents, and the structure for special needs support as a whole. Liaison with social services and with the Health Trust and Authority has not been sufficiently strong, although there have been recent improvements.

12. Despite the existence of good practice in some parts of the department of education and leisure services, the Council lacks a systematic and rigorous framework for performance management. Review processes therefore start from a weak base; the Best Value review process so far has been unsatisfactory, and pilot reviews variable in quality. Despite this, the review of the school development service is helping to bring about improvements. The review also suggests halving the allocation of time for routine monitoring of schools by link inspectors. This is justifiable; the LEA should allocate the available time to schools in inverse proportion to success.

13. The LEA is aware of what needs to be done to tackle the weaknesses outlined above, and is making improvements or has plans to do so. The inspection team is confident that the LEA is capable of responding to the recommendations in this report, and of continuing to make progress.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

14. Oldham is a mainly urban borough, with outlying rural areas and villages, lying to the north-east of Manchester. The borough suffers from considerable deprivation. According to the Department of the Environment's Index of Deprivation 2000, an average ward score places Oldham as the 38th most deprived district out of 354 in England. The borough is polarised between rich and poor, with the two Saddleworth wards among the most affluent ten per cent nationally, but in sharp contrast there are seven wards among the most deprived ten per cent nationally.

15. The population of Oldham is around 219,000. The school population is approximately 42,000. Just over 20 per cent of all pupils are from minority ethnic groups, the largest of which are the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. Although the total population is relatively stable, the proportion belonging to the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities is increasing.

16. In 1999, the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals in primary and secondary schools was broadly similar to that found nationally (25.5 per cent in primary schools compared with 20.5 per cent nationally, and 23.0 per cent in secondary schools compared with 18.1 per cent nationally). The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals rose slightly in 2000 to 27 per cent in primary schools and 24 per cent in secondary schools.

17. The percentage of pupils with statements of special educational need (SEN) in primary and secondary schools is well below the average found nationally and in similar authorities. The percentage of pupils educated in special schools is similar to that found nationally and in similar authorities.

18. Oldham maintains 101 primary schools (16 infant, 16 junior and 69 all-through primary). Of these, 7 are voluntary controlled and 33 voluntary aided. There are 15 secondary schools, ten of which are 11-16 and five 11-18. Four of the five 11-18 schools are voluntary aided. There are seven special schools. In addition, nine independent schools are located within the borough. No schools opted for grant-maintained status so there are no foundation schools. Since 1992, there has been an Oldham Sixth Form College, as well as Oldham College.

Performance

19. In general terms, performance is below the national average but in line with that found in similar authorities. The rate of improvement is greater than that found nationally and has been particularly rapid between 1998 and 2000. Details are given below.

20. Baseline assessment suggests that the attainment of pupils entering Oldham schools is below the national average.

21. Attainment in 1999 at Key Stages 2 and 3, in English, mathematics and science tests, was below the national average but broadly in line with similar

authorities. Provisional results for 2000 at Key Stage 2 show that attainment in English and mathematics has improved and is now just below the national average. Seventy-three per cent of pupils gained level 4 or better in English, compared with 75 per cent nationally, and 70 per cent gained level 4 or better in mathematics, compared with 72 per cent nationally.

22. At Key Stage 4 in 1999, the percentage of pupils attaining 5+ A*-C grades, and the average points score, were in line with similar authorities but below national figures. Provisional results for 2000 show a large improvement in the percentage of pupils attaining 5+ A*-C grades, from 39.9 per cent in 1999 to 42.4 per cent in 2000. Results remain below the national average (49.2 per cent in 2000).

23. The rate of improvement between 1998 and 2000, at Key Stages 2 and 4, was significantly greater than the national average. Oldham recorded the seventh best improvement in Key Stage 2 English results between 1998 and 2000, from 59 to 73 per cent, and the 13th best improvement in Key Stage 2 mathematics results over the same period; from 53 to 70 per cent. At GCSE, the rate of improvement has accelerated since 1995.

24. The Education Development Plan (EDP) identifies underachievement by pupils of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin, and by white indigenous pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

25. OFSTED inspection data shows that the percentage of Oldham's primary schools graded 'very good' or 'good' is below the national average but greater than that found in similar authorities. Evidence from the schools inspected twice suggests improvements have been made with regard to quality of education, but not in the areas of school management and ethos.

26. For secondary schools, OFSTED's inspection data shows that the percentage of schools graded 'very good' and 'good' is below both the national average and that found in similar authorities. However, evidence from those schools which have been inspected twice suggests that improvements have been made with regard to quality of education, school management and climate.

27. Attendance in primary schools in 1999 was below the average for similar authorities and well below the national average. Rates of authorised absence were particularly high. Attendance has got worse over the last four years.

28. Attendance in secondary schools in 1999 was below the national average, but similar to that found in similar authorities. Unauthorised absence is above that found nationally. Attendance has improved over the last four years, at a slightly faster rate than that found nationally.

29. The rate of permanent exclusions in primary and secondary schools in 1999 was similar to that found in similar authorities and nationally.

Funding

30. The Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) funding allocation per pupil in Oldham is at the average for metropolitan authorities. The Council has always spent at or above the education SSA. In 1995/96, spending was seven per cent above the SSA; since then, spending has varied from in line with the SSA to two per cent above. Resources to schools have been increased consistently in line with SSA increases and Government intentions in recent years.

31. Within the education SSA blocks, the Council has given a particularly high priority to provision for children under five, with expenditure in this block at 164 per cent of SSA.

32. The Council delegated 86.2 per cent of the Local Schools Budget in 2000/01 compared with a metropolitan average of 84.9 per cent. The main features are given below:

- central administration costs are low, at £38 per pupil compared to a metropolitan average of £48 per pupil;
- a high proportion of the resources to meet the special educational needs of pupils are delegated, with centrally retained resources being £116 per pupil compared with a metropolitan average of £143 per pupil;
- the delegated budget per pupil in 2000/01 is £2409, compared with the metropolitan average of £2373.

33. Oldham has been successful in attracting extra resources into schools and these resources have been targeted to meet educational priorities. Substantial capital investment has gone into new school buildings and the LEA has received considerably more than the average level of resources per pupil from the New Deal for Schools. Schools have received resources from community regeneration initiatives funded through the Single Regeneration Budget. Partnership funding is about to produce new sport facilities in one school.

Council structure

34. The May 2000 elections resulted in a change in the control of Oldham Council, which had been Labour since 1980. The current make up of the Council, which overall consists of 60 members, is 31 Liberal Democrat, 25 Labour, two Conservative and two Green. The Council has 11 committees of which education and leisure services is one. The education and leisure services committee does not have sub-committees but at the time of the inspection a school improvement and standards panel was being set up, and a joint panel with social services on young people in public care had just been established. The Council has proposals for modernisation which are due to be implemented in May 2001. Area committees were set up in September 2000.

35. The education and leisure services department is one of seven directorates under the line management of the chief executive. The department has a director, and four assistant directors (community services, management support, pupil and student services and school services (vacant)). The current chief education officer

had a five-year contract which finished at the end of the inspection; at this point the new chief education officer took up post. She had been appointed to the authority in June, and spent the intervening four months working in the chief executive's office on corporate matters. This assisted a smooth transition.

The Education Development Plan

36. The Education Development Plan (EDP) provides a good base from which to promote school improvement. The EDP priorities are reflected within service development plans. Links to other major plans are shown within the individual EDP activity action plans, which are clear and appropriate. The EDP has received approval for three years, subject to revisions to plans for monitoring literacy which are now in place. The school survey indicates that schools consider the clarity of the EDP to be good and consultation on the EDP to be satisfactory.

37. The EDP priorities are appropriate and are derived from a detailed audit of strengths and weaknesses. They are aligned with national priorities in an easily accessible matrix. The EDP local priority for social inclusion provides links across a number of services and functions and reflects well the objectives identified by the Oldham Partnership for community development. The EDP priorities are:

- (1) raising the standards of literacy
- (2) raising the standards of numeracy
- (3) improving the quality of school leadership, management and governance
- (4) improving the use of information and communications technology as a learning and communication tool
- (5) improving the quality of teaching and learning
- (6) improving provision for special educational needs and individual needs, and
- (7) promoting social inclusion for all groups.

38. Whilst the target setting process is satisfactory and is increasingly supported by a wide range of good quality data, the EDP has a few weaknesses. The degree of challenge presented in the EDP targets is variable. In addition, the EDP audit does not identify low levels of school attendance in comparison to national averages, and the activities for attendance do not include enough emphasis on the primary phase.

39. Following the production of the annual agreed statement for each school that reviews attainment and progress, specific school improvement projects, aligned to EDP and school priorities, are negotiated by the headteacher and the school development adviser. These projects provide a key method by which the LEA promotes higher standards, but it is not clear enough in the EDP how the schools access the activities concerned.

Progress in implementing the Education Development Plan

40. Progress in implementing the EDP and arrangements for monitoring are satisfactory overall. The published review of the EDP in 2000 is weakened by a lack of evaluation of the precise progress made within each activity, although the resultant revisions are reflected in current individual service plans. Any delays in the

implementation of activity action plans are known to the EDP managers, but this information, and the identification of new activities, is not clearly set out in the published review for the information of schools and elected members.

41. Substantial progress has been made towards the EDP targets set for 2002 in Key Stage 2 literacy and numeracy and for GCSE. These EDP targets, set in 1998, now appear to be cautious. The Key Stage 2 literacy results in 2000 (73 per cent) are now only three points below the agreed 2002 target of 76 per cent and Key Stage 2 numeracy results (70 per cent) are just two points below the 2002 target of 72 per cent. The Government's targets of 80 per cent for level 4 or above in Key Stage 2 literacy and 75 per cent for level 4 or above for Key Stage 2 numeracy now provide feasible goals for the LEA. GCSE results have also shown significant improvement, and now, at 42.4 per cent, are close to the agreed 2002 target of 43.5 per cent.

42. Progress towards the targets set for exclusions is satisfactory; there were 52 permanent exclusions in 1999/2000 which exceeds the indicative target set. However, progress on meeting the targets set for attendance has been unsatisfactory. Rates of unauthorised absence have reduced but much remains to be done, particularly in the primary phase. There is no reference within the published EDP review to progress made within EDP activities for attendance.

The allocation of resources to priorities

43. The local authority resource allocation processes are generally sound, but have some weaknesses. Three year strategic budgeting was introduced for the first time in April 2000, but still uses the historical allocation as the base rather than carrying out a fundamental review.

44. The LEA explains its resource decisions well to schools. Schools are consulted on budget priorities. Meetings are held to present budget decisions to all headteachers and are attended by the treasurer and the chief education officer, senior elected members and frequently the chief executive. Headteachers feel that the culture of openness enables them to question and understand the basis on which decisions are taken.

45. There is not consensus, however, on the fairness of the distribution of resources between secondary and primary schools, and the LEA has not carried out a needs based review of the funding formula. Some small scale shifts of resources have been made to primary schools, but in 1999/2000 the difference in funding between secondary pupils and those in Key Stage 2 was in the highest quartile for metropolitan authorities. The formula for funding for special schools based on numbers of places is currently being reviewed.

46. The LEA delegates a much higher proportion of SEN funding to schools than most authorities and as a result central SEN expenditure is in the lowest quartile for metropolitan authorities. The funding is allocated in three bands according to clear criteria and a higher than average percentage of the delegated resources is used to support pupils without statements.

Best Value in education

47. The Best Value process in education is unsatisfactory. This results from the lack of a systematic performance review process and weaknesses in the processes for the pilot Best Value reviews. Despite this, the education reviews have produced a positive stimulus for improvement in some of the services reviewed.

48. The external auditor's report on the Best Value Performance Plan for 2000/01 identifies concerns about the Council's approach to challenge, competition and comparison and the lack of a coherent performance management system to stimulate continuous service improvement. The Council lacks a corporate plan, and evaluation of plans is not sufficiently systematic at present. Within education, however, service reviews are effective in the management support services group, which makes positive use of the excellence model to evaluate performance. Overall, though, this culture is not embedded systematically in all of the education services.

49. Three pilot Best Value Reviews (BVRs) were inspected; these were corporate reviews of education services led by the policy performance and regeneration department. These pilot reviews were variable in quality; they did not always include sufficient challenge or rigorous costing of alternatives. There was also a lack of appropriate professional input. As a result, the reviews did not always result in a clear and viable vision for the future development of the service. Despite some weaknesses, the BVR of the school development service is helping it to improve its services through the development of a trading account. These BVRs are reported in the relevant parts of section 2 of this report.

Recommendations

In order to improve the strategy for school improvement:

- a detailed review of the progress in implementing the EDP, setting out the resultant changes to activities and the rationale for these changes, should be completed and reported to elected members, schools and other partners; and
- the targets set initially for Key Stage 2 literacy and numeracy and Key Stage 4 GCSE should now be revised in the context of the significant improvement in attainment and the greater experience gained in target setting.

In order to improve the structures for achieving Best Value:

- a rigorous performance management and review system should be embedded across the department of education and leisure services.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Implications of other functions

50. The LEA was judged to give effective support overall to all the schools visited during the inspection; in 11 of the 19 schools, the support was judged to be good. Overall, the school development service (SDS) provides highly satisfactory support for school improvement. Details are given in the rest of this section. Amongst other services, management support services all make a contribution which is at least sound; the financial management service and the departmental personnel service are particularly impressive. Support for ethnic minority pupils and for children from Traveller families is good. The ethnic minority support service has begun to focus on raising achievement, as well as supporting the development of fluency in English.

51. The strategy and services for special educational needs in the main provide sound support for school improvement. However, the time taken to produce statements of special educational need is too long, the partnership with parents is not strong enough, and some procedures and structures need reviewing. Support for behaviour, attendance and for children in public care is not contributing sufficiently to school improvement.

Monitoring, challenge, support, intervention

52. The LEA strategy for providing monitoring, challenge, support and intervention is satisfactory overall and has some strengths. The strategy for monitoring is based upon analysis of OFSTED inspection reports, analysis of performance data by the SDS and visits to schools by school development advisers (SDAs) in their role as the school's link inspector. All schools currently receive three days for monitoring per year and two visits by SDAs to governing body meetings.

53. Monitoring visits follow an agreed and published agenda. SDAs, working cross-phase, appropriately combine discussions on target setting and school review with the headteacher and senior staff with the observation of teaching both for literacy and numeracy and to promote school self-review. Notes of visit contain agreed action points for the SDA and the headteacher. The headteacher and the SDA compile an agreed statement each year that, in most cases, forms a satisfactory basis for future support and intervention by the LEA. However, there are some weaknesses in that the quality of the notes of visit and the agreed statements is not consistent. Additionally, the agreed statement format is weakened by the absence of clear, summarised strengths and weaknesses and key timed action points.

54. The SDS is well led. The majority of the 13 SDAs have a good level of expertise. Most have experience at senior management level in schools that gives them credibility and helps them to challenge schools appropriately. In addition to their school link role, all SDAs lead on a subject or theme for the LEA. Overall, the deployment of staff within the SDS is satisfactorily planned, and provides good support and challenge to schools. The SDS manager has also been acting as an assistant director for more than a year. A consequence has been that the

established performance review processes in the SDS have not been sufficiently rigorous in identifying and acting upon a few instances of weak SDA work in schools.

55. Whilst there is an appropriate balance of expertise available within the SDS, there are significant pressures on the time of some individuals in a service that is increasingly moving onto a traded basis. Two-thirds of the SDS budget is now obtained from income generation, mainly from the purchase of services by schools via a good and flexible service level agreement. This level of income generation is above the average for similar services in other LEAs. Some training is purchased from external sources when necessary but this is not a routine part of current planning and provision.

56. The SDS was subject to a pilot BVR reported to elected members in July 2000. Whilst there are weaknesses in the council's BVR process, some financial and staffing comparisons have been made with other LEAs and close attention given to the views of schools. The decision to halve the allocation of SDA time for monitoring is justifiable, given that schools can buy additional SDA time if they want it, but the review suggests the monitoring time remaining is allocated to each school uniformly. With the good and improving range of data now available to assist LEA monitoring of schools' targets and performance, the continued application of a common number of monitoring visits per school, regardless of success, is in conflict with the Code of Practice on LEA-School relations.

57. The action plan produced following the BVR is vague and does not provide detailed action points and costings. The review itself, however, does provide a helpful basis for developing the service further on a traded basis and, given the current flexible SDS service level agreement, the LEA and its staff have the expertise to deliver these changes. With the already significant requirement for income generation, balancing the strategic requirements of the LEA with the programmed contracted time with schools remains a considerable challenge for the management of the service.

Collection and analysis of data

58. The quality of data supplied to schools has improved and is now very good, but the analysis of the data and its application both within the LEA and its schools are not fully developed. The research and information service produces a published profile for each school that gives very good quality comparative data for the school, including averages for Oldham. Data are given on ethnic minority groups, gender and free school meals, and trends in performance in comparison with benchmarked groups. The guidance issued to schools on target setting sets out a clear framework of principles to be followed, distinguishing appropriately between forecasts and targets, and giving trend lines and LEA data to assist the target setting process. A satisfactory validated baseline assessment scheme operates in Oldham schools with clear and helpful advice on implementation, including feedback to parents.

59. The school's data profile is used by the SDA and the school as the basis for reviewing performance and agreeing targets. The original targets set by schools and the LEA were cautious. However, the comprehensive school data profiles, now in their second year of production, provide a very sound basis for reviewing

performance and setting challenging targets. Lack of agreement on target setting between the school and the SDA would result in consideration by the LEA of placing the school on the register of schools causing concern in respect of attainment. At the time of the inspection, the LEA had already analysed the provisional assessment results for 2000, comparing the performance of schools against targets in order to differentiate and prioritise early visits by SDAs.

60. The analysis of data and its application are hindered by the absence of a co-ordinated pupil database within the LEA, although development work has started. There is no data available on the effects of pupil mobility, both within the LEA and across boundaries, on LEA and school targets and performance. Data for use in special schools is at an embryonic stage with a working group examining attainment data for those pupils who do not attain level 1. It is recognised in the EDP review that further support and guidance on the interpretation and use of data are required, particularly for middle managers in schools; this conclusion was confirmed by visits to schools.

Support for Literacy

61. The quality and effectiveness of support provided for literacy are good. Results in literacy have shown a significant improvement. At Key Stage 2, the proportion of pupils achieving level 4 or above has risen by 14 percentage points from 59 per cent in 1998 to 73 per cent in 2000, and is now only three percentage points below the agreed 2002 target. At GCSE, the proportion of pupils gaining a C grade or above has risen from 39.5 per cent in 1998 to 46.8 per cent in 2000. The school survey indicates that support for literacy is good in the primary phase and better than the average for LEA. Secondary schools feel that support is satisfactory.

62. A school development adviser manages the literacy strategy and the consultants with the strategic overview of both the literacy and numeracy strategies being taken by the manager of the SDS. The work of the literacy consultants is very good, in particular the training for the literacy strategy and the help given to schools receiving intensive support. The monitoring provided by consultants and SDAs has also usefully promoted standards. Some initial training for teachers in literacy at Key Stage 3 has been undertaken but this activity has not met the planned timescales set in the EDP.

63. There is good liaison with the ethnic minorities service, including joint training and the production of joint guidelines. Family literacy development has appropriately focused upon ethnic minority groups and upon families on particular estates. Liaison on family literacy between community services and the SDS has been effective.

64. A very significant fall in the demand for the school library service and a resulting budget deficit revealed weaknesses in the service and prompted a pilot BVR that was reported to elected members in March 2000. The review is flawed in that it does not question whether Oldham should provide this service. Although it makes comparisons with similar services in three other authorities, the review focuses largely on an alternative source of income generation by obtaining books for schools on a discount basis. The staff of the service were not consulted on the

viability of this proposed solution. There is doubt about the amount of income that could be generated from such a proposal. The BVR takes no account of the LEA's literacy strategy and does not provide a satisfactory basis for improvement.

Support for Numeracy

65. Support for numeracy is a particular strength. Attainment of pupils at Key Stage 2 at level 4 or above has risen by 17 per cent between 1998 and 2000 and is now, at 70 per cent, only two percentage points below the 2002 target agreed in the EDP and five percentage points below the national target for 2002. At GCSE, the proportion of pupils gaining a C grade or above has risen from 33.7 per cent in 1998 to 40.5 per cent in 2000. Ninety four percent of primary schools and fifty four percent of secondary schools surveyed report that support is good or very good.

66. Leadership of the numeracy team is excellent. New target ranges have already been produced for discussion with schools in the context of the very significant rise in attainment. A SDA manages effectively the implementation of the strategy. The numeracy consultants give very good support to schools; demonstration lessons, observation of lessons and feedback are particularly valued. Support for secondary schools is good. All secondary schools have observed primary phase work in numeracy. In five secondary schools, consultants are providing support for planning and teaching demonstration lessons. Numeracy is being linked with the development of thinking skills for Key Stage 3 and 4 pupils. Seven summer schools were run in 2000; in addition, an event was held to boost performance for targeted pupils in Key Stage 4.

Support for Information and Communication Technology

67. The LEA's support for improving the use of ICT in the curriculum is sound overall, and is good in primary schools. The effective use of National Grid for Learning (NGfL) funds, together with good training for coordinators and teachers, have improved the range and quality of ICT hardware and software and teaching and learning in primary schools. The strategy for secondary schools is less well articulated, and the support given to them has been mixed. However, most secondary schools have made good or satisfactory progress in developing the curriculum for ICT. The LEA's analysis of section 10 reports indicate that standards in ICT in Oldham schools are above the average for all key stages, and better in secondary schools than in primary schools.

68. The LEA has effectively planned and implemented the investment in equipment and communication in schools through the NGfL. A decision was taken to concentrate assistance initially to primary schools through a local development called the Well Connected Primary Initiative. This was reasonable and, as a result, developments in secondary schools have depended more on individual school initiative. As part of the NGfL investment, schools which lacked them have been equipped with internet connections. The LEA is part of a consortium of authorities which is developing faster (broadband) connections.

69. The LEA undertook a systematic audit of the level of equipment available and of the ICT development plans in primary schools. Primary schools have been

helped to bid for resources and to choose and locate equipment, cabling and internet connections. The majority of primary schools felt well supported through the investment process, although some felt under pressure to buy particular hardware.

70. Most primary schools have also been well supported in developing curriculum policies and in the use of a range of curriculum software. A good range of high quality training has been provided. Particular strengths include the six day course for new coordinators, the annual conference for primary coordinators and basic skills training for teachers prior to the implementation of the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) training in some schools. Training for the national literacy strategy has included the use of ICT. Good support and advice have been provided in ways of assessing and monitoring pupils' achievements and progress. Several schools are finding the LEA's record system for pupils, the 'Driving Licence', a useful tool in doing this.

71. Secondary schools have received less support from the LEA and, while most agree with the strategy of prioritising improving provision in primary schools, many headteachers still feel that the LEA has not provided sufficient leadership and support for the secondary curriculum. However, most secondary schools have been able to plan the development of ICT successfully, even without strong leadership from the LEA. The LEA provides support for the use of ICT in some subjects, for example, design technology, modern languages and religious education. Liaison between primary and secondary schools is not strong enough. Some schools, both secondary and primary, felt that differences in equipment were unhelpful and that primary schools needed to have some PCs particularly for older pupils to use.

72. Developments in administrative ICT are sound, but use of electronic communications between schools and the LEA is in its infancy. Technical support, for both administrative and curriculum ICT, is variable and is too fragmented.

73. The LEA gives schools satisfactory support to develop the range of administrative packages linked to pupil databases that are necessary to improve school administration and curriculum applications. A programme is underway to update the financial package used by schools and their administrative software. Schools now have e-mail addresses, but electronic communication between the LEA and schools is only just starting.

74. LEA staff have provided advice to schools on administrative ICT and equipment purchase. The different elements of technical support are not currently well enough integrated to meet the needs of all primary schools, although the LEA has negotiated some consortium arrangements. An equipment maintenance contract from a private company provides an excellent service. However, the outsourced software support and training has been variable in quality. In particular, some schools are concerned about speed of resolution of problems by the help desk, support for the personnel module and the cost and flexibility of some of the training provided. The forthcoming BVR provides an opportunity to improve the quality of support.

Support for schools causing concern

75. Support for schools causing concern is sound overall. Oldham has one primary school deemed by OFSTED to require special measures, three schools (two primaries and one special) with serious weaknesses and 25 schools which are a cause for concern to the LEA. Four schools which were judged to require special measures in the period 1993 to 1998, have all made the progress necessary and have been removed from this category.

76. Once placed by OFSTED in the categories of special measures or serious weaknesses, schools receive, in the main, good support. The LEA's support strategy is appropriate, although its effectiveness is dependent on the expertise of the link inspector. Recently, good use has been made of the Standards Fund grant. For example, schools have been able to buy in additional classroom support assistants and resources, and extra support from advisers. The support provided is well matched to the needs of the school. Examples of effective support include seconding experienced headteachers or deputy headteachers to the school, providing intensive literacy and numeracy support, the use of advisers to observe and evaluate teaching and provide coaching for teachers, and also support from the personnel and financial management services. The LEA establishes a monitoring group for each school which reviews progress and is effective in ensuring that support is well co-ordinated. However, the chair of governors is not automatically a member of this group, which is a weakness.

77. In the past, the LEA has not had robust enough procedures to stop schools from sliding into the categories of special measures or serious weaknesses. Schools have not always received the required challenge, support or intervention early enough. In some instances, this has been at least in part due to weaknesses in the quality of the allocated link inspector. The SDS has now introduced more rigorous monitoring of its own work, and is better placed to prevent such slippage.

78. Schools in the category of causing concern to the LEA also receive support which is well matched to their needs. Such schools are identified with care, but although the general criteria for the category are published in the EDP, these lack precision. Procedures for supporting schools immediately after removal from special measures or serious weaknesses are not yet formalised.

Support for governors

79. Support for governance is very good. The LEA school governance advisory group provides a regular consultative forum. Mutual help and advice between governing bodies is available via the independent Oldham Governors' Association. There are very few unfilled governor vacancies, although some difficulties are experienced in recruitment. The LEA runs recruitment information sessions and has made particular efforts to recruit governors from all ethnic groups.

80. There is a good range of appropriate training opportunities with evaluation sought from participants. The LEA produces a detailed termly newsletter containing good quality advice on current issues for governors. Governors appreciate the clear advice and plain language summaries of national documents provided by the LEA.

Governors tend not to be involved sufficiently in the monitoring of targets and the processes of school self review. Some governors are familiar with the European Excellence Model from their own employment and this provides useful experience for their school in self-review.

81. Approximately half of Oldham schools buy back a governing body clerking service from the LEA. This receives strong approval from those purchasing it. All governing body clerks have access to appropriate training.

82. Over four out of five schools surveyed considered that support for the governing body provided by the LEA was good or better, a figure above the average for other LEAs. Schools and governors are highly appreciative of the quality and promptness of service from the LEA governors' support and training service.

Support for school management

83. Support for school management is effective, with some significant strengths. Recent OFSTED inspection reports show management and efficiency to be good or very good in over 80 per cent of Oldham schools inspected, a position which is similar to that found nationally in primary schools, but above that found nationally in secondary schools.

84. Eighty per cent of primary and secondary schools surveyed reported that support to headteachers and senior staff is good or better, although support for middle management is reported to be weaker. Headteachers interviewed expressed strong support for the programme of school improvement in Oldham.

85. Opportunities for management training are good. In addition to support for work towards national standards via the National Professional Qualification for Heads (NPQH) and the Leadership Programme for Serving Heads (LPSH), the LEA provides an accredited two-year management development course in conjunction with Manchester Metropolitan University. Well-subscribed courses are run each year for middle managers in secondary schools and for primary curriculum co-ordinators. In-service training needs are identified appropriately by SDAs from the agreed statement process, OFSTED inspection reports, subject networks within the LEA and the analyses of school development plans.

86. All in-service and curriculum support work offered by the SDS is available to schools in a good and flexible service level agreement which embraces fully the principles of the Code of Practice and the objectives of school self autonomy. Schools have the choice to decide what elements of the support services they wish to purchase; there is no requirement to purchase a core service. The in-service training component of the agreement provides free access to all in-service courses. Other components of the service level agreement include subject networks, support for newly qualified teachers, ICT, school review, additional adviser time and school improvement projects.

87. School improvement projects (SIP) provide a very effective and flexible method of supporting school development. The direction and management of the SIP is the responsibility of the school. The SIP is agreed between the school and

the SDA and uses delegated funding, but with some Standards Fund support. The principle of a SIP is 'your project, our support', this principle is borne out fully in practice and contributes well to the development of school autonomy. A majority of the schools visited reported strong support for, and good impact from, recent SIPs. By linking schools that are running similar SIPs, for example the underachievement of boys, a good network of local support is established. Schools are required to report on progress with the SIP to the LEA and other schools. An external evaluator has been engaged to evaluate the impact of SIPs and in-service work across the LEA.

88. Effective work in curriculum and professional development is identified from SDA visits to schools and from SIPs. Details are published by the LEA in a good practice register that includes identified points of reference. In Oldham, two secondary schools have beacon school status; also one secondary school is a Technology College and one a Sports College. The LEA uses expertise from these schools within its curriculum networks but more formal arrangements are yet to be determined; approval of the status of two of these schools has only recently been made.

89. Following initial work on school self review, the LEA now promotes the Excellence Model but this process is at an early stage of development. The Oldham Chamber of Commerce provides some useful joint training for this model with business partners. The model has the potential to assist the consideration of Best Value principles by governing bodies.

90. Support for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) is satisfactory. The school survey indicates that the service is well regarded by primary schools, although less so by secondary schools. The LEA operates a primary NQT pool whereby a co-ordinated advertisement for new staff is made, headteachers take part in the interviewing process and a recommended list of applicants is made available to headteachers purchasing the service. This pool arrangement receives strong support from headteachers.

91. The LEA meets its statutory duties in relation to religious education. An agreed syllabus is in place, providing good guidance on a range of faiths. The Oldham SACRE examines all references to religious education in school inspection reports and responds to good practice identified within them.

92. The LEA has an outdoor education centre which was recently the subject of a pilot Best Value Review (BVR). This was instigated because the centre was in considerable financial difficulty following a continued decline in its income after the costs of the service had been delegated to schools. It was not providing a sufficiently good service to schools. Following consultation with headteachers, the BVR recommended that the costs of the service should no longer be delegated and this has now happened. The BVR was not challenging as alternatives were not rigorously analysed and costed and there was no clear vision given for the future development of the service. Consultation with headteachers was partial. While the centre can offer potentially good links with school improvement, and is now trying harder to meet schools' needs, many schools are not convinced that it does so.

Support for gifted and talented pupils

93. Support for gifted and talented pupils, identified as an activity in the EDP, is at an early stage of development. A summer school was held in 2000 and some initial in-service work has been provided, but a register of gifted and talented pupils has not yet been compiled. Staff in the literacy and numeracy teams are preparing materials for gifted and talented pupils with a target date set in 2001 to disseminate experience in the use of these materials.

Recommendations

In order to improve support for school improvement:

- the amount of time for school monitoring visits should be allocated in inverse proportion to the success of schools;
- notes of visit to schools and the annual agreed statements should provide sharp, accurate and clear judgements, and action points for the headteacher, the governing body and the LEA;
- further support and training should be provided for the analysis, interpretation and application of the wide range of good quality data; and
- the use of school self review should be extended, linked to the agreed statement process, and should involve the governing body.

In order to improve the support for ICT:

- there should be consultation with secondary schools in order to determine a joint strategy; and
- contract management of the outsourced administrative software and training provision should be tightened to improve consistency.

In order to improve the support for schools causing concern:

- the SDA allocated to such schools should have appropriate expertise and experience;
- the chair of governors should be a member of the school's monitoring group; and
- procedures for supporting schools once they are no longer subject to special measures or serious weaknesses should be formalised.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate planning

94. Oldham's corporate planning has improved since 1999, and is for the most part satisfactory. In 1999, Oldham's key strategic body, the partnership board, produced a community plan called the Oldham Framework. It is a useful document that recognises the need for regeneration, brings together the public, private and voluntary sectors, and sets out the partnership's mission, encapsulated within four main themes:

- putting people first;
- competing in the wider economy;
- creating confident communities and quality neighbourhoods; and
- achieving a quality environment.

95. The plan includes strategic objectives for the Council and it has clear links with departmental plans, such as the EDP. However, it is a broad document and does not give a precise direction to other plans. The Council recognises this and is in the process of developing a corporate plan which will more clearly define overall priorities. The current absence of such a plan means that planning is not fully coherent.

96. The department of education and leisure services has a departmental business plan, which is its overall planning document. This is broadly compatible with the Oldham Framework but goes into more detail, setting out the department's objectives under the four Framework areas, and adding an area of performance management. The plan clearly includes responsibilities, key tasks, actions and targets, although some of the targets are too vague. All services have service plans which are usually, but not always, of sound quality.

97. Other departmental plans are clear and feasible, and most are dealt with elsewhere in the report. The department has taken the lead on the production of the Early Years Development and Childcare (EYDC) Plan. This is a good plan and is the outcome of extensive consultation. It sets out relevant priorities related to operating and supporting the EYDC Partnership, increasing the quantity and quality of nursery education and childcare, and providing a children's information service. The 1999-2000 plan identified appropriate activities to be undertaken in order to address these priorities. Targets relating to the provision of places for three and four year olds have been met. The arrangements for monitoring and evaluating the Plan's targeted actions are good and underpin the setting of ambitious but achievable targets in the 2000-2001 plan.

98. On the whole, plans are being well implemented. Many of the individual plans produced by the education and leisure department are effectively monitored. However, as explained in Section 1, evaluation of plans at present is not sufficiently systematic.

99. The leadership provided by elected members, the chief executive and the department's senior management team is sound. Elected members have, over a long period of time, given high priority to education. There has been a good level of consensus over educational matters, and the recent change in political leadership has not resulted in significant changes to educational priorities. There has been a slight change of emphasis - for example the outgoing administration put a strong emphasis on improving school buildings, whilst the new administration is keen to extend the range of consultation, for example with minority ethnic communities.

100. The education and leisure committee has functioned reasonably effectively. Leading members have been provided with sound advice by senior officers. Decisions have been made and implemented. However, although overall LEA data on school performance have gone to committee, arrangements for members to conduct a more detailed examination of standards have been weak. Appropriately, a school improvement and standards panel is being set up to strengthen arrangements for scrutiny. A joint panel with social services on young people in public care has also been set up, with the aim of enabling more effective support in what is an area of acknowledged weakness.

101. The outgoing Chief Education Officer and his senior team have presided over a period of steady improvement. The CEO rightly focused on improving standards. The SDS was restructured four years ago to improve its credibility with schools, and to provide a much sharper focus on improving standards, a development which has largely been successful. Effective mechanisms for consultation with schools have been developed and a strong partnership now exists where differences of opinion can be fully explored. There has also been a focus on developing external partnerships, including the lifelong learning partnership. However, some weaknesses, most particularly in the areas of support for behaviour, attendance, and aspects of special educational needs, were not tackled. Up until the last year or so, some groups of services were not communicating sufficiently with each other. Embedding the improving standards agenda more firmly across the whole of the LEA is rightly now seen as an important priority. There are, in addition, some structural problems within the department, for example, in the pupil and student services group, which are explored in the relevant sections of this report. The incoming CEO is already assessing the situation and making plans for further improvements. Officers and schools view the future with optimism.

Partnerships with external agencies and other local government departments

102. Strong partnership working is facilitated by the Oldham partnership board, which brings together a large range of local interests including the LEA. Other partnerships, such as the Chamber of Commerce, COMPACT/Education Business Partnership (EBP), the careers service partnership and the lifelong learning partnership, are all linked to the board. There are many examples of effective co-operation including the provision of pre-16 work experience placements, young enterprise, the reading partners programme, out of school hours learning and assistance with promoting Investors in People and The Excellence Model in schools. Schools benefit from these activities, which are in the main well targeted at particular areas, schools, or pupils, although schools are not always aware of exactly what is available. The EYDC Partnership brings together effectively the bodies who work

with young children from education and social services and the voluntary and private sectors.

103. There are close, productive working relationships with the police. Both strategic and operation liaison are very strong and there are examples of effective working at many levels. For example, youth forums have been set up in most secondary schools, three schools' liaison officers work in Oldham, and police are involved in working with disaffected young people in a youth inclusion project. The LEA and police are represented on the drugs action team, the crime and disorder executive, and the racial incidents strategy group.

104. Diocesan representatives are consulted over school places and admissions and school buildings. In the past, they have not had regular contact with the SDS over standards, or with senior officers. The situation is improving in that they are to be included on the new school improvement and standards panel, and regular meetings at chief officer level have now been agreed.

105. Relationships with the social services department, whilst often good at school level, have not been strong enough overall. This is reflected, for example, in the lack of sufficiently effective liaison over children in public care. Likewise, there is not a strong record of strategic liaison with the Health Trust or Health Authority, and this has been a major contributory factor in the delay in producing statements of SEN in time. Schools also point to problems in accessing speech and language therapy for their pupils. Liaison with both social services and health is getting better but is still not strong enough.

Management services

106. Support given by all of the management services is at least satisfactory and some of the services are excellent. The LEA has met the requirements for Fair Funding. Schools have clear descriptions of the services provided and of the costs involved and they valued the opportunity given to meet service heads to discuss the services. Currently, however, many of the services do not offer an adequate choice of levels of service.

107. The management support services group has enthusiastically used The Excellence Model to review the services it provides. This has enabled them to sharpen their customer focus and to put in place effective performance management systems.

108. Financial support services provided to schools are excellent. They provide a good manual of guidance on procedures, accurate and reliable information, valuable financial projections that assist schools with their financial planning and a financial reconciliation service which many schools chose to buy. Schools value the positive and supportive customer focus of the services. Oldham has encouraged a culture of prudence in schools and, as a result, no schools were in deficit in April 2000.

109. Personnel support services provided to schools are very good. There is a good personnel procedures manual and schools value the support provided on casework, appointments, NQT recruitment, supply cover and restructuring of school

staffing. Current developments include work with schools to produce a differentiated service and with the north west personnel group to develop benchmarks. The personnel service within the department of education and leisure services understands the differences between school based and central local authority contracts.

110. Cleaning, catering and grounds maintenance services are all at least satisfactory. In general, schools do not have a strong culture of purchasing from providers outside the LEA. Schools have valued the services provided by the LEA and have tended not to want to look to alternative providers. Discussions are starting with schools about how management support services should develop to meet their needs in the future, particularly through the development of an increased choice of level of service.

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION

Strategy

111. The LEA's strategy for SEN is sound. In line with national policy, the LEA has a strategy for the inclusion of pupils with SEN. This is reflected in its practice, policy and its resourcing strategy and it is a priority in the EDP. Strategic planning, however, is somewhat fragmented and is not sufficiently detailed to show targets, timescales and resources. Monitoring of progress is not specific and detailed enough.

112. Compared to national and regional averages, the LEA provides statements for very few pupils; one and a half per cent. Of these, two-thirds are educated in special schools. As a result, few pupils have statements in mainstream primary and secondary schools. Additional funds to support pupils with SEN in mainstream schools are delegated to schools at an earlier stage to help prevent the need for a statement. This is a significant achievement. Almost two per cent of pupils are supported in this way, and these pupils, together with those with a statement, bring the number of pupils supported close to the national average number of pupils with statements. The LEA reports that a 75 per cent saving on administrative costs required to produce a statement is being delegated to schools for earlier intervention.

113. Central spending on SEN is relatively low. Funds to support pupils with statements of SEN are devolved to schools and are much lower than the average for similar authorities, reflecting the strategy for earlier intervention to prevent problems becoming severe. However, funds delegated for specific pupils with SEN but without a statement, are greater than the funds delegated at this stage by similar authorities. The resourcing strategy is generally appropriate and is well supported by headteachers. It gives schools control over the use of funding, which helps them to meet needs. Schools' applications for additional funds for named pupils are audited and moderated by the LEA's support services, and schools are held highly accountable, in terms of provision, for how they spend their delegated funds.

114. The audit takes a considerable amount of time that removes the support services from schools. Also, much of their school visiting time in the autumn term is devoted to the audit task. The LEA has trialled some funding on a two-year basis to reduce the audit time. Whilst it has been necessary for the audit process to be well established and accurate, the time commitment is too great and it now requires a review.

115. Special schools have been involved in a long period of review. Following consultations, proposals have now been confirmed to amalgamate three schools into two primary phase schools for pupils with a wide range of learning difficulties. Proposals for change in the secondary phase have been problematic and are currently a major focus of discussion and debate following a report from an independent consultant. The need for change is pressing and headteachers are keen to make progress.

116. Seventy-four pupils attend special schools outside the LEA, and of these 51 attend independent special schools, mostly for pupils with emotional and behavioural

difficulties (EBD). Placements are costly, not just for the pupils with EBD. The number of new placements in schools outside the LEA has been reduced since April. Of the 500 pupils in Oldham special schools, almost a third are from neighbouring authorities. The LEA does not have long-term, firm agreements with these authorities, and so far has not taken sufficient account of this situation as it plans for the future of the special school sector.

117. The assistant director with SEN within his brief was appointed in January 2000, and is starting to tackle areas requiring improvement. The internal structure of pupil and student services is not helpful to the provision of coordinated support for SEN as the assistant director has to relate directly to 12 individual service heads. Appropriately, there are plans to restructure.

Statutory obligations

118. The LEA fails to meet its statutory obligations in relation to SEN. For a considerable time, statements have taken too long to be completed. They have not been completed in the recommended 18-week period mainly due to difficulties in obtaining medical advice, but also because of inefficient systems in the statutory assessment service.

119. Considerable improvements have been made through more productive partnerships with the Health Authority and Health Trust and improved systems in the statutory assessment service, including the recent addition of electronic systems. Between October 1999 and May 2000, 57 per cent of statements were completed in 18 weeks. Potentially effective new systems have been put in place to manage and to monitor the work. However, the rate remains unsatisfactory, and current staff shortages make it difficult to implement elements of good practice established recently, and to maintain improvements. The statements of SEN produced are detailed and thorough.

120. These shortcomings were reflected in criticisms which parents made of the LEA's management of the statutory assessment process. Parents identified problems with communication, information, levels and timeliness of support provided, management of links with parents and the need for a focus group for parents. The parent partnership scheme, re-commenced in September 1999, following the virtual collapse of the previous scheme, but its existence is not well enough known by parents. Information made available to parents as part of the first step in the statutory assessment process is incomplete and of poor quality.

Improvement and value for money

121. Support for school improvement is sound overall. Special schools are very positive about the support received from the SDS. However, the service is limited in its capacity to advise on matters such as setting learning targets for pupils with more severe and complex learning difficulties and the provision of a suitable curriculum for such pupils.

122. Support to pupils from the hearing and visual impairment services, the pre-school service, the educational psychology service and the primary and secondary

support service in general contributes well to school improvement. The work of the hearing and visual impairment services was felt to be good by most schools visited. The education psychology service, whilst positively regarded by headteachers, is only able to give limited time to schools. The service works mainly with pupils who have been put forward for statutory assessment and within these constraints, allocates its time well on the basis of need. There is little time available to work preventatively with schools or with pupils with EBD where schools have serious concerns.

123. Special educational needs co-ordinators receive good support from their contact person within the primary or secondary support service. They have access to network meetings, which are also a good source of support, and to a range of training offered by the LEA.

124. The primary and secondary support services, through the audit and subsequent monitoring, hold schools to account for the use of delegated funds. A degree of monitoring is also undertaken in relation to the outcomes for pupils. There is, however, no overall LEA analysis of attainment in relation to those pupils not reaching the recommended levels at the end of key stages.

125. The strategy for SEN promotes inclusion, and funds for SEN are delegated to schools at an early stage. The LEA's monitoring of the use of funds is good. However, monitoring of the outcomes for pupils is not as well developed, statutory obligations are not met and parents feel dissatisfied. Overall value for money is satisfactory.

Recommendations

In order to improve provision for SEN:

- the SEN strategic plan should be developed to include clear time scales, costings and resources;
- Pupil and student services should be restructured to give a greater impetus and focus to SEN developments;
- the audit process used to allocate additional funds to pupils with SEN in mainstream schools should be reviewed and streamlined;
- liaison with the health authority and health trust should be further developed, and the systems used by the statutory assessment service should be consolidated, so that statutory requirements concerning the production of statements of SEN are met;
- the information provided to parents at the beginning of statutory assessment should be of high quality, and regular opportunity for consultation and discussion with parents should be provided;
- better systems should be devised to monitor and evaluate the progress of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools; and
- special schools should have access to specialist advice to support them in the process of school improvement.

SECTION 5: ACCESS

The supply of school places

126. The LEA has very effectively managed the implementation of the Class Sizes Plan and the supply of school places in both the primary and secondary sector. The School Organisation Committee has agreed a School Organisation Plan. It has taken decisions on a number of changes in Standard Numbers relating to the implementation of the Class Sizes Plan, but no major changes have been necessary.

127. The policy performance and regeneration department has carried out good work to improve the sophistication and accuracy of pupil forecasting, particularly in the primary sector. Forecasting models are being developed to take into account the increases in numbers of ethnic minority pupils in some areas, the concentration of ethnic minority pupils in some schools, and the reductions in pupil population in some other areas of the borough.

128. In the primary sector in January 2000, there were eight per cent of surplus places overall. Some reorganisations have taken place to remove surplus capacity in areas of the borough and Basic Need borrowing approvals from the DfEE have been used to expand capacity in another area. There are some tensions in the supply of places relating primarily to the desire of ethnic minority families to send children to specific schools very close to where they live. The LEA has been unable to expand capacity in the schools concerned because of the DfEE requirement that capacity in all schools within a two mile radius is considered before a Basic Need bid can be accepted.

129. Within the secondary sector there was an overall surplus of 7.2 per cent of places in January 2000. Two schools have until recently had problems with declining numbers and at one stage both had more than 30 per cent surplus places. Numbers have now increased in both schools in part because of positive action by the LEA and the schools to improve standards, and there is optimism about future numbers.

Admissions

130. Literature available to parents on admissions to school until September 2000 was competent but poorly presented. The literature has been substantially revised for September 2001 to make it more attractive and understandable by parents. The admissions section has also been running a campaign to explain the issues involved with admissions to parents.

131. The admissions process operates smoothly and effectively in the borough. The authority operates a conciliation process with parents prior to appeals being held, which results in the resolution of over 80 per cent of potential appeals. Hence, the rate of appeals in Oldham is low. However, appeals are not all resolved until early July. In order to mitigate the effect of this for parents, secondary transfer days for pupils are held after appeals have been resolved.

Asset management planning

132. The LEA has effectively carried out its property management responsibilities through substantial investment of capital resources in school buildings and its Asset Management Planning process. Condition surveys have been carried out and reported to the DfEE as required. All schools have been given the resulting information and presentations have been made to governing bodies on request. Surveys concerning the suitability of buildings are currently being carried out.

133. The local authority has invested substantial resources over many years in replacing school buildings. Twenty new schools have been built in the last twenty years. A range of capital resources, including borrowing approvals obtained through bids to the DfEE under the categories of surplus place removal, Basic Needs and New Deal for Schools, as well as income from sale of LEA assets and from a Private Finance Initiative scheme, have been used to fund this programme. Oldham has received considerably more than the average level of resources per pupil from the New Deal for Schools initiative. This investment has made a substantial positive contribution to the condition of Oldham schools.

134. The Asset Management Plans are starting to assist schools to prioritise investment. Technical support services to schools are effective and responsive to school needs. Schools use a mixture of the direct services organisation (DSO) and private contractors for building work.

Provision of education otherwise than at school

135. Support for pupils out of school is broadly satisfactory with some areas of strength. The services involved are strongly committed to reintegrating pupils into mainstream provision and are generally successful in this. There is not a coherent overall strategy which links all services. The range of provision meets most, but not all, pupils' needs.

136. The admissions and exclusions unit monitors school-aged pupils systematically. Information on pupils out of school is kept up-to-date and schools and other relevant agencies informed. Procedures for removing pupils from school rolls are clearly laid out.

137. The emphasis on reintegrating excluded pupils into school is generally very effective. Prompt and thorough assessment of pupils' needs and support for pupils and schools during the process of reintegration are effective in reducing further exclusions. Tuition is started promptly after a pupil is excluded. The LEA has increased the amount and range of tuition available to secondary pupils. It is not yet full time but for most pupils amounts to at least 18 hours per week. There is some emphasis on improving standards, for example pupils' literacy skills. There are several curriculum initiatives, particularly at Key Stage 4, for pupils at risk of disaffection, often undertaken with Oldham Compact and Oldham College. These have increased the range of provision, but there is not a coherent strategy to ensure that the provision is well-tailored to individual needs.

138. The LEA has recognised that current provision is unsatisfactory for the very small number of primary aged pupils who have been permanently excluded and cannot be quickly found a new place. The current home tuition programme is limited and unsuitable for pupils' needs.

139. Provision for pupils who are out of school for reasons other than exclusion has a number of strengths. The monitoring of pupils educated at home has been improved; registration is thorough and the pupil welfare service visit termly. A recently appointed part-time support teacher has begun to assess individual pupils' needs and the quality of home teaching, and has been successful in reintegrating pupils where appropriate. The mother and baby unit provides good support and is increasing the length of programmes of education and advice available for pregnant schoolgirls and some young mothers.

140. The LEA is well placed to develop its current provision into a coherent and comprehensive strategy to ensure that all pupils out of school receive fulltime education by 2002.

Attendance

141. The LEA's support for attendance has been insufficient and leadership in the area has been weak. Until recently, the LEA has failed to deal with a deteriorating pattern of primary attendance. The recently appointed assistant director is providing good leadership and issues are beginning to be tackled.

142. Attendance in both primary and secondary schools is below national averages. The rate of absence at primary schools has risen over the last five years although the trend nationally has been declining. The rate of absence from secondary schools has fallen but is still above average for similar LEAs. Levels of unauthorised absence have been high but are beginning to reduce in line with the LEA targets. Primary unauthorised absence was 0.55 per cent in 1999/00, compared with a target for 2001/02 of 0.4 per cent. At secondary level, the figure for 1999/00 was 1.44 per cent, compared with a target for 2001/02 of 1.0 per cent.

143. Attendance is therefore a major area of concern which the LEA has failed to tackle until recently. The LEA spends much less than the average for metropolitan boroughs on educational welfare services. The pupil welfare service (PWS) was greatly reduced in size in 1993 and its brief was limited to ensuring that the LEA met its statutory duties. As a result, although the PWS executes most of its statutory duties thoroughly, there has been a lack of leadership and support for schools in their efforts to improve attendance. The limited support available has not always been well targeted. The LEA has given insufficient attention to promoting good attendance and has only recently published a policy on managing attendance and absence. There is no clear rationale, understood by schools, for the use of prosecutions. The monitoring of attendance of children in public care is only just beginning this term because reliable data have not been available.

144. Until recently, most support was given to secondary schools. Secondary schools have benefited from recent Standards Funds which have enabled them to appoint attendance assistants. Most are well placed to manage their own

attendance and are satisfied with the role of the PWS in dealing with the most difficult cases.

145. The support for primary schools is more variable and often insufficient. The PWS is beginning to target its scarce resources on those schools with weaker attendance. Recently there have been some initiatives aimed at improving attendance. The LEA has developed helpful guidelines for schools and parents aimed at reducing the impact of extended holidays on pupils' attendance. This is well monitored. Good use is made of home-school liaison officers in schools with high proportions of ethnic minority pupils to contact parents promptly when pupils are absent and to promote the importance of good attendance. A recent truancy sweep was undertaken with the police.

Behaviour support

146. The LEA is providing insufficient guidance and inadequate support for pupils with the most challenging behaviour, particularly at the primary stage. The LEA has recognised this and initiated some pilot projects and established a new central support team. However, there is not an adequate strategy or enough expert advice to support schools with their most challenging pupils.

147. OFSTED inspections of primary schools show the atmosphere in the school to be below that in similar LEAs and in LEAs nationally, and to be declining. Secondary school inspection findings indicate that the quality of school climates is in line with national averages and better than those in similar LEAs and, in the six schools now inspected twice, has improved. Permanent exclusions are broadly in line with the national average in both primary and secondary schools in Oldham. There was a significant drop in the number of pupils excluded in 1999-2000 in line with the targets set by the DfEE.

148. The Behaviour Support Plan, drawn up in 1998, contains appropriate general development targets, but it lacks a clear focus for action with specific deadlines and success criteria. A draft behaviour policy has been drawn up which indicates much more clearly the LEA's role and responsibility in supporting schools. Funds for supporting pupils with behaviour problems have been devolved to schools. However, schools' use of the funds is not monitored, not enough advice is available to schools, and there is not an effective strategy for supporting those pupils with the most challenging behaviour. Some support is available from the primary SEN support team and occasionally from educational psychologists but it is insufficient and not always easy to access. There is some additional support from the primary tutorial service linked to one of the special schools; this does not provide many places and schools feel it has not been effective in enabling pupils to cope better in school. The LEA has recognised the problems and is piloting strategies, including a project on improving behaviour based at one primary school. However, the planned increase in the number of classroom support assistants for the most challenging primary age pupils is unlikely to be effective as expert support and advice are needed. A small number of primary schools visited had bought in support for behaviour from an independent consultant which they felt was effective.

149. Support for behaviour in secondary schools is more effective; there is a better range of support available and some secondary schools have bought in specialist support and advice. The pupil retention grant has enhanced the resources available to some schools. Schools visited valued the support available from the secondary tutorial service, linked to one of the special schools, in working with pupils with difficult behaviour and felt that it helped to avoid exclusions, though one school reported that it was not possible to gain sufficient support to meet pupils' needs. Six schools are involved in a project with Manchester University to identify strategies for avoiding exclusion and this is being extended to include other schools.

Health, safety, welfare, child protection

150. The LEA has procedures in place for emergency planning and to tackle health and safety issues in schools. The support and guidance given by the LEA on child protection procedures are effective. A clear policy, recently updated, together with a handbook and regularly updated guidance to schools ensure that schools are well informed about their responsibilities and alerted promptly to new issues. The Psychology Welfare Service provides regular training and there is a reference library available for schools' use.

Children in public care.

151. The Council's leadership and support in this area have been unsatisfactory. It has begun to fulfil its responsibilities for children in public care, but the response has been tardy. The education and leisure department and social services have been slow to establish the necessary cooperation and structures to ensure that an accurate and up-to-date register of children in public care is available to schools and support services. A register compiled by social services has only just been given to schools and several schools visited reported that their list was already out of date. The LEA has not published data on the achievements of children in public care in Oldham, set targets or identified good practice. Schools are aware in general terms of their responsibility for children in public care and have designated teachers. There has been no training for schools.

152. Two advisory posts were agreed, one within social services and one in Education. The post of education adviser has just been filled and suitable plans are in place to enable the LEA to meet its responsibilities, but so far little has been done. The new adviser has clear priorities for action and is drawing up guidance and planning training. A report has recently, but belatedly, alerted elected members to the extent of their responsibilities.

Ethnic minority children including Travellers

153. The support for ethnic minority pupils is very good. Raising the attainment of some ethnic minority groups remains a challenge.

154. Oldham has a large population of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage and smaller numbers from other heritage groups. Baseline tests indicate that a high proportion of Bangladeshi and Pakistani pupils enter school at very early stages of fluency in English. The performance of ethnic minority pupils has shown some

improvements at Key Stages 1 and 2. However, the proportion of Pakistani and Bangladeshi boys and of black British pupils gaining 5+ A*-C grades at GCSE remains well below the average for the LEA. The LEA collects a good range of data on the performance of ethnic minority pupils and some schools, particularly those with large numbers of ethnic minority pupils, have begun to use it effectively in setting targets for individuals and cohorts.

155. The LEA consults well on its strategy for funding and support for ethnic minority pupils. Funding has been delegated to schools for some years and schools have now been given greater autonomy in the use of the Ethnic Minorities and Travellers Achievement Grant (EMTAG). Schools welcome this flexibility and LEA support for the transition of funding has been good. A recent survey by OFSTED found that arrangements for the support of ethnic minority pupils in schools visited were effective. The LEA has provided good guidance on the range of uses for EMTAG funding; schools with large numbers of ethnic minority pupils make good use of bilingual assistants and home-school liaison officers.

156. The small central team of ethnic minority support services (EMSS) project managers has a wide range of expertise and offers good support to schools, though they are not involved in monitoring teaching and learning. Training needs have been identified, and a sound range of training is available for EMTAG funded staff. The EMSS team has begun to focus on raising achievement, and is starting to establish projects with some schools. A research project has been undertaken to identify factors affecting the achievement of African Caribbean pupils. There are plans to appoint a development worker to support schools and pupils in raising achievement.

157. Good support is provided for the small number of Traveller pupils, currently about 50, in Oldham. Support is provided by a coordinator who has a half time contract. The needs of individual pupils are thoroughly assessed and programmes drawn up for them. Excellent tuition and pastoral support are provided. Attendance is monitored and schools are encouraged to respond promptly to absence. Relationships with schools are good, though support for curriculum development in schools with Traveller pupils is limited. Resources are provided for pre-school children and support is given to circus children with distance learning materials. Good progress has been made in monitoring performance and setting targets for the cohort. Target setting for individuals is very good.

Social exclusion

158. The LEA has a strong commitment to promote social inclusion which schools understand and support. Support for ethnic minority pupils including Travellers makes an effective contribution to promoting social inclusion as does the work of the pupil reintegration service in helping permanently excluded pupils to return successfully to school. The lack of effective support for a small number of pupils with challenging behaviour in primary schools and the lack of an effective strategy for raising attendance, particularly in primary schools, partially undermine the LEA's effectiveness in avoiding social exclusion.

159. The LEA has a good range of measures in place to combat racism and is taking steps to improve these. The LEA has responded promptly to the Report of the

Inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence (Macpherson Report 1999). This is particularly important given the high level of racial tension in Oldham involving several ethnic groups. A race incident strategy group has been established. A review is being undertaken to improve the reporting of racist incidents by schools. Liaison with the police is good. A conference for schools and other interested groups was held in the summer term, although fewer schools attended than had been hoped. Headteachers understand the reason for the importance placed by the LEA on responding effectively to racism, but the LEA is well aware that more remains to be done to raise awareness and develop strategies in all schools.

160. A number of projects within the LEA are designed to enhance cultural awareness and break down racial barriers. Links have been established with schools in Mirpur and Sylhet and some schools have begun pairing arrangements with other local schools with pupils from different ethnic backgrounds

Recommendations

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

- better provision should be made for excluded primary age pupils.

In order to improve support for attendance:

- the leadership of the PWS should be strengthened and its resources matched to need: and
- an overall strategy should be produced, in consultation with schools.

In order to improve provision for pupils' behaviour:

- a coherent strategy for the support of the most challenging primary age pupils should be drawn up, in consultation with schools, clearly outlining where the responsibilities lie, and by whom they should be implemented.

In order to improve the support for children in public care:

- better monitoring systems need to be established as a matter of urgency;
- liaison between education and leisure and social services should be strengthened; and
- strategies for training, target setting and raising attainment should be put in place.

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve the strategy for school improvement:

- a detailed review of the progress in implementing the EDP, setting out the resultant changes to activities and the rationale for these changes, should be completed and reported to elected members, schools and other partners; and
- the targets set initially for Key Stage 2 literacy and numeracy and Key Stage 4 GCSE should now be revised in the context of the significant improvement in attainment and the greater experience gained in target setting.

In order to improve the structures for achieving Best Value:

- a rigorous performance management and review system should be embedded across the department of education and leisure services.

In order to improve support for school improvement:

- the amount of time for school monitoring visits should be allocated in inverse proportion to the success of schools;
- notes of visit to schools and the annual agreed statements should provide sharp, accurate and clear judgements, and action points for the headteacher, the governing body and the LEA;
- further support and training should be provided for the analysis, interpretation and application of the wide range of good quality data; and
- the use of school self review should be extended, linked to the agreed statement process, and should involve the governing body.

In order to improve the support for ICT:

- there should be consultation with secondary schools in order to determine a joint strategy; and
- contract management of the outsourced administrative software and training provision should be tightened to improve consistency.

In order to improve the support for schools causing concern:

- the SDA allocated to such schools should have appropriate expertise and experience;
- the chair of governors should be a member of the school's monitoring group; and
- procedures for supporting schools once they are no longer subject to special measures or serious weaknesses should be formalised.

In order to improve provision for SEN:

- the SEN strategic plan should be developed to include clear time scales, costings and resources;
- Pupil and student services should be restructured to give a greater impetus and focus to SEN developments;

- the audit process used to allocate additional funds to pupils with SEN in mainstream schools should be reviewed and streamlined;
- liaison with the health authority and health trust should be further developed, and the systems used by the statutory assessment service should be consolidated, so that statutory requirements concerning the production of statements of SEN are met;
- the information provided to parents at the beginning of statutory assessment should be of high quality, and regular opportunity for consultation and discussion with parents should be provided;
- better systems should be devised to monitor and evaluate the progress of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools; and
- special schools should have access to specialist advice to support them in the process of school improvement.

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

- better provision should be made for excluded primary age pupils.

In order to improve support for attendance:

- the leadership of the PWS should be strengthened and its resources matched to need: and
- an overall strategy should be produced, in consultation with schools.

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- a coherent strategy for the support of the most challenging primary age pupils should be drawn up, in consultation with schools, clearly outlining where the responsibilities lie, and by whom they should be implemented.

In order to improve the support for children in public care:

- better monitoring systems need to be established as a matter of urgency;
- liaison between education and leisure and social services should be strengthened; and
- strategies for training, target setting and raising attainment should be put in place.

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