



OFFICE FOR STANDARDS
IN EDUCATION

**INSPECTION OF
NORTHUMBERLAND
LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

JULY 1999

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

CONTENTS	PARAGRAPHS
INTRODUCTION	1-4
COMMENTARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS	5-11
SECTION 1: THE CONTEXT OF THE LEA	12-26
SECTION 2: THE PERFORMANCE OF SCHOOLS	
SECTION 3: THE LEA STRATEGY	
The Role of the LEA	
The Council's Strategic Statement	27-29
The School Improvement Strategy	30-36
Other LEA plans	37-46
Consultation	47-48
Monitoring and evaluation	49-51
Statutory Duties	
Funding	52-58
Admissions and school places	59-62
Liaison with other services and agencies	63-65
SECTION 4: THE MANAGEMENT OF SERVICES	66-102
SECTION 5: LEA SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT	103
Performance data and target setting	104-110
Support for improving the standards of literacy	111-117
Support for improving the standards of numeracy	118-121
Support for schools causing concern	122-130
Support to improve the quality of teaching	131-140
Support to improve the management and efficiency of schools	141-144
Support for management	145-152
Support for school governors	153-158
APPENDIX 1: THE CONTEXT OF THE LEA	
APPENDIX 2: THE PERFORMANCE OF SCHOOLS	

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*¹, which focuses on the effectiveness of Local Education Authority (LEA) work to support school improvement.

2. The inspection was in two stages. An initial review established a picture of the LEA's context, the performance of its schools, its strategy and the management of services. The initial review was based on data provided by the LEA, school inspection and audit reports, LEA documentation and discussions with LEA members, staff in the Education Department and in other Council departments and representatives of the LEA's partners. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views of aspects of the LEA's work was sent to 211 schools. The response rate was 76 per cent.

3. The second stage of the inspection involved studies of the effectiveness of aspects of the LEA's work through visits to seven high schools, eight middle schools deemed secondary, 14 first schools, three special schools and the pupil referral unit. The purpose of the visits was to discover the views of governors, headteachers and other staff on aspects of the LEA's strategy. The visits also considered whether the support provided by the LEA contributes to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in the school, and provides value for money.

4. This report draws on material from the initial review, from the school survey and from the school visits, together with evidence relevant to the themes drawn from recent visits by Her Majesty's Inspectors to Northumberland's schools.

COMMENTARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

5. Northumberland is the most sparsely populated and one of the most isolated of English LEAs. Its population is stable but unevenly distributed. There are few major centres of population, although those that there are contain areas of disadvantage. Throughout the county, schools are organised in a three tier system. They include some of the largest schools in the country, and some of the smallest. For the Council, the provision of effective and accessible services which meet the varied needs of schools, is radically different from that facing Councils in more geographically compact areas.

6. With some variations, standards in Northumberland's schools mirror the national average. Most schools make good use of low levels of funding; very few give rise to serious concern, and there is a sizeable core of very good schools. The school visits undertaken for this inspection, showed that the Education Department had contributed over the years to this sound picture by helping to foster a climate of improvement. There are few signs of complacency even in the most effective schools. The LEA has provided sustained and effective support for teaching and has given advice to governors which has led them to appoint effective headteachers. School environments and buildings, compared with those nationally, are spacious and of good quality.

7. The planned coordination of work across several Council departments is not a traditional feature of Northumberland. However, the LEA relies on the corporate centre to provide management services to schools and it is mainly, but not entirely, in this area that there have been checks on the LEA's effectiveness. These services have not provided a clear specification of what schools can expect. With the exception of personnel, they have weaknesses in their management and organisation which the lack of competition and poor management information systems have not helped to put right. Schools have access to technical advice when they request it, thanks to the valued work of the School Support Officers, but more rigorous and challenging support to improving school management on issues such as development and financial planning is not consistently provided. However, there is no doubt that when a problem is identified, support is provided effectively. Link advisers are now attached to schools in a consistent way. The system is new, but the early evidence shows that, as yet, it does not provide all the support which is required.

8. The experience of repeated reductions in expenditure too, has forced the LEA to scale down its operations and has limited its ambitions. Emerging financial issues are being tackled - albeit in a piecemeal fashion - but a more strategic overall approach to managing the LEA's budget is now required. In addition, the geography of the County presents considerable difficulties in planning school places effectively. Nevertheless, the strategies which have been implemented so far to reduce surplus places are insufficient, especially in those areas where a further fall in the number of pupils is predicted.

9 The LEA Performs the following functions

- production of the Education Development Plan; (paragraphs 30-35)
- support to schools which fulfils the intentions of the Code of Practice for LEA Relations; (paragraphs 80-81, 127-1 30)
- support to improve the quality of teaching; (paragraphs 131-140) support for schools causing concern; (paragraphs 122-1 30)
- support to governors; (paragraphs 153-158)
- support to schools in implementing the Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs; (paragraphs 84-86, 134)
- support to school partnerships to ensure a coordinated approach to school improvements across the different school phases; (paragraph 36)
- support to raise the attainment of individual pupils from educational psychological and education welfare services, and services for the sensory impaired. (paragraphs 86-89)

10 The following functions are not adequately performed

- the management of demand-led budgets; (paragraph 55)
- the provision of information and communications technology; (paragraphs 70, 98-101)
- access to management information for management and administration; (paragraph 70)
- support to school management which is comprehensive and coordinated; (paragraphs 141-142, 145-149)
- the reduction in the supply of school places; (paragraphs 60-62)
- support to schools for the use of performance data to set targets; (paragraphs 104-110)
- the provision of sufficient education for pupils who are excluded from school; (paragraph 45)
- the timeliness of the issue of statements of special educational needs; (paragraph 85)
- the appraisal of teachers and headteachers. (paragraph 137)

11. The overall judgement, therefore, is that the LEA's strengths outweigh its weaknesses. There are a number of weaknesses, some of them serious, but the strengths are in the key areas of school improvement. We have little doubt that the LEA is having an impact and that it does so inexpensively, through an effective light touch approach which does not infringe the autonomy of schools. It has forged constructive relationships with schools and has retained schools' goodwill through a difficult period of reductions in expenditure. The LEA has responded to the Government's agenda, in some ways better than most. It has drafted an Education Development Plan which provides a good basis for future development. This builds on a thorough and frank audit of school performance but also on a consensus shared with schools about what matters most, and what the LEA does well

RECOMMENDATIONS

A *In order to develop the strategic management of the Education Department the Council should:*

- i. assess the staffing which will be required, to continue to manage the LEA's existing functions effectively, and to identify and tackle emerging issues;
- ii. develop appropriate strategies for planning and management of corporate initiatives which affect the Education Department and schools in the following areas:
 - overview the Council's budget to ensure that it reflects corporate priorities and develop a budget strategy which is in line with the Government's three year financial settlements;
 - provide advice to schools on how they can successfully apply for external grants and funding;
 - monitor and evaluate all LEA budgets and services regularly. This should include developing service level agreements which precisely specify services so that schools are able to monitor and evaluate the service;
 - collect and analyse management information which is compatible across departments and which can be used to identify emerging trends and difficulties.

B *In order to improve the management of the LEA 's budget;, the LEA should:*

- i. collect and use the necessary management information to improve the accuracy of initial budgets for home to school transport, special educational needs and repairs and maintenance;
- ii. allocate responsibility for maintaining expenditure within these budgets;
- iii. continue to work closely with all schools in budget deficit to agree and monitor arrangements to remove budget deficits in a timely manner.

C *In order to improve the use of information and communications technology for management and administration in the Education Department and in schools the LEA should:*

- i. review the information systems and use of information and communications technology within the LEA to ensure the provision of timely management and budget information;
- ii. review with schools' representatives the plans for the installation of, and training for, the new information and communications technology system in schools to check that all aspects of the project are integrated, that the necessary resources needed to effectively manage the programme are in place, and schools know what to expect so they too can make appropriate plans.

D *In order to reduce the number of surplus places the LEA should:*

- i. devise a long term strategy which takes account of the financial and management issues linked to surplus places, smallschools and falling rolls and reviews options for the School Organisation Committee.

E. *In order to improve the use of the LEA's performance data which are circulated to schools the LEA should:*

- i. provide better training on the use of the LEA's data;
- ii. develop a consistent system based on the best of existing practice to set challenging yet attainable targets;
- iii. provide schools with consistent systems for information technology which make the transfer and manipulation of performance data easier;
- iv. develop greater links between the findings of the analysis of data and target setting with the process of school development planning.

F *In order to strengthen and further develop the support provided to school management, the LEA should:*

- i. provide informed and challenging support to school management including financial management, school self review and evaluation and the schools' procedures for monitoring the quality of teaching;
- ii. enable schools to contribute more directly to setting the agenda for every link adviser visit;
- iii. agree, with schools, a practical and efficient method of feeding back to schools the findings of the visit in a way in which schools can make improvements;
- iv. develop a training programme and monitoring systems for the work of link advisers which ensure a consistent service to all schools;
- v. ensure an effective workload management system which clarifies the priority for generalist in relation to specialist advisory work;
- vi. ensure a system whereby the findings of a link adviser's visits contribute to an accessible database which can be used to identify overall trends as well as individual weaknesses in individual schools;
- vii. ensure that all headteachers and governors understand the step procedure for identifying schools causing concern.

G *In order to provide better access for all school staff and governors to participation in LEA events and training:*

- i. increase the use of partnerships and local groups to deliver training and as a means of consultation and communication for school staff and governors;
- ii. develop the work of the area advisory committees so that it is known and used by governors and schools or disband them;
- iii. provide better and find more imaginative ways of providing support for teaching heads of small schools;
- iv. produce an information digest or regular newsletter which assists governors in keeping up-to-date on new educational initiatives and developments.

H In order to improve support for pupils with special educational needs and behavioural difficulties the LEA should:

- i. ensure that assessments are completed within the recommended timescales;
- ii. review the staffing of the Education Psychology Service to ensure that statutory responsibilities for the timely issue of statements are met;
- iii. coordinate the components of behaviour support in line with the behaviour support plan in order to provide a framework which schools and other agencies can understand and within which they can operate;
- iv. increase the amount of home tuition which is allocated for the education of pupils who are excluded from school.

SECTION 1: THE CONTEXT OF THE LEA

Socio-economic context

12. Northumberland is a sparsely populated and generally rural county. The population of 309,000 is unevenly distributed and mostly settled in the south-east.

13. The socio-economic context varies from rural, sometimes isolated, districts of outstanding natural beauty to small towns. Some of these were mining communities and, with closure of the mines, they now face economic disadvantage. The percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals is marginally lower than the national average but this varies in schools from none to about 43 per cent.

The schools and their pupils

14. Northumberland's schools are organised in a three tier system which was reviewed in 1995. One hundred and forty-three first schools educate pupils aged 4-9; of these, 66 schools have nursery classes and there is one nursery school. Forty-five middle schools admit children aged 9-13, and 16 high schools educate students aged 13-19. Schools are organised in 16 area partnerships of a high school² with its feeder middle and first schools.

15. Forty-six first schools, eight middle schools and two high schools have more than 25 per cent surplus places. The sizes of first schools vary and 58 have fewer than 100 pupils. Only two schools are grant maintained. Under the new requirements from September 1999, one grant maintained high school will become a community school.

16. The percentage of pupils who have statements of special educational need and the percentage of pupils who attend special schools are in line with national averages. There are nine special schools, in addition four schools are resourced for pupils with hearing impairment; three for pupils with communication disorders; three for pupils with severe learning difficulties; and three for pupils with moderate learning difficulties. The LEA makes a significant number of placements in schools outside the County for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

17. The majority of excluded pupils receive home tuition for two hours a week and alternative pre-vocational placements are found for pupils up to Year 11. A newly established Pupil Referral Unit has a developing role in preparing pupils for reintegration into school or alternative placements.

Funding

18. The Council receives a relatively low settlement per pupil through the formula of the standard spending assessment. Northumberland has spent at or just above the standard spending assessment for the past 5 years (Table 5, Annex 1). The

²preparations are underway to merge two partnerships to reflect the closure of two high schools and the opening of a single new high school in September 2000.

Council's draft education budget for 1999/2000 is set at 0.7% per cent above the standard spending assessment.

19. Reductions have occurred in the education budget every year from 1992-1998. The total standard spending assessment fell in real terms between 1992/3 and 1997/8. Within the education budget the schools' budget was relatively protected, taking a cut in real terms of 11 per cent compared to 36 per cent from the non-delegated education budgets. Ninety-one point nine per cent of the potential schools budget is delegated to schools, although the actual amount delegated is the lowest of all County Councils (Table 5.2, Annex 1).

20. Recent growth in funding is targeted at schools and part or entirely funded by government grant. Successful bids have been made for Standards Fund, New Deal for Schools, the Reduction of Class Size and the Removal of Surplus Places. Capital Challenge and the Single Regeneration Budgets have boosted budgets, the latter particularly in one area. The Department is now working with other agencies in a Health Action Zone.

21. Compared with other Councils, the LEA spends a higher amount per pupil on redundancy and historic early retirement costs and home to school transport. Expenditure per pupil on management services is broadly similar to other county councils but much of this expenditure is outside the direct control of the Education Department. The recharges to the education budget from the corporate centre and other central departments are not transparent. Other expenditure per pupil - for example on the Educational Psychology Service and the Education Welfare Service - is low. Budgets which were significantly overspent on original estimates in the last two years include structural repairs and maintenance, home to school transport, and statementing costs.

The Council

22. The Council's committee structure has been reviewed and changes are being made in line with "Modernising Local Government". The Education Committee has been abolished and has been replaced by a Cabinet and scrutiny committees. Previously, the Education Committee met every three months. A panel was convened on an ad hoc basis to consider more urgent business. Some panels and sub-committees of the Education Committee were short term and for specified purposes, for instance to review the progress of schools requiring special measures.

23. Four area advisory committees consist of elected members, school governors and headteachers, together with representatives from higher education or the Training and Enterprise Council. The "areas" are not geographically defined but combine school partnerships in both rural and urban areas. These committees will continue to operate in the new arrangements.

The Structure of the Education Department

24. The Education Department consists of three main divisions: Standards and Effectiveness; Education Support; and Amenities. The Standards and Effectiveness division is managed by the Principal Adviser and includes the Inspection and

Advisory Service, the Educational Psychological Service and other support services for pupils with special educational needs (SEN).

25. The Education Support Division is headed by a Divisional Director and its work is divided into four main area teams, together with a finance and awards unit. It offers a range of services to school management, many of which are provided by the Council's central services. In addition, the Division has responsibility for client functions, for school transport and buildings including the bids for New Deal for Schools. Functions such as the administration of statements, admissions, exclusions, services for travellers, bilingual children and attendance are also included in the responsibilities. The Division has oversight of the Music Service and Northumberland Training Agency which is largely self-funded and which provides training and work placements for young people who have left school with few qualifications.

26. The Amenities Division has responsibilities for Libraries (including the School Library Service), Arts and Heritage (including archives).

SECTION 2: THE PERFORMANCE OF SCHOOLS

OFS TED Section 10 inspections judge that pupils' attainment on entry to first schools is good in a higher percentage of schools and poor in a lower percentage of schools than nationally.

Attainment at each Key Stage is at least in line with national averages;

- at **Key Stage 1**, in all core subjects, a significantly higher proportion of pupils attain Level 2 than the national average;
- at **Key Stage 2** the proportion of pupils attaining Level 4 or above in English and mathematics is marginally lower but still in line with national averages. In the science test the proportion of pupils attaining Level 4 or above is higher than the national averages. The drop in performance between Key Stage 1 and 2 is higher in Northumberland than that found nationally;
- at **Key Stage 3** in the National Curriculum tests in all core subjects the proportion of pupils attaining Level 5 and above is in line with national averages;
- at **Key Stage 4** the proportion of pupils attaining 1A*~G; 5A*~C, 5A*~G and average points score in GCSE examinations is slightly higher, but still in line with that found nationally;
- at **age 18** the average points score for students entered for two or more subjects at Advanced Level is marginally higher than the national average;
- ***the relative attainment of boys and girls*** is in line with the national averages; girls attain better at Key Stage 1 and in English at each Key Stage. However, at Key Stage 3 a higher percentage of girls attain Level 5 in mathematics than nationally.

Standards of attainment have risen since 1996

- ***attainment in Key Stage 1 in teacher assessments and National Curriculum tests at Key Stages 2 and 3*** shows improvement which is mostly in line with the national rate;
- ***attainment in the percentage of pupils achieving 1 A*~G and 5 A*~G grades and 5 A*~C grades at GCSE***, with some minor fluctuations, has improved in line with national rates of improvement.

Attendance is good and rates of permanent exclusion are low.

In the first cycle of inspection, the overall evaluation of first schools shows a broadly satisfactory profile, and in middle and high schools a higher percentage of schools were judged good or very good than was the case nationally.

- the ***standards*** achieved in first schools are broadly in line with schools nationally. In middle schools, standards were judged to be on average marginally lower than schools nationally with 49 per cent in need of some improvement compared with 41 per cent nationally;
- the ***quality of education*** in first schools reflects the national distribution although a higher percentage of Northumberland's schools require some improvement. In middle and high schools the quality of education is broadly in line with the national profile, but a higher percentage of schools was judged to provide a very good quality of education;
- the ***schools' climate*** in first schools broadly reflects the national average, but the climate of middle and high schools is significantly better than secondary schools nationally;
- the ***management and efficiency*** of first schools are broadly in line with national percentages, but a lower percentage of schools are judged very good. In middle and high schools management and efficiency are largely similar to the national averages for secondary schools;
- in ***second cycle inspections*** in 1997-98 four middle schools and three high schools were inspected; all but one of these schools had made at least satisfactory improvement, and all schools had the capability to make improvement.

SECTION 3: THE LEA STRATEGY

Until recently, the Council has not taken a corporate approach to planning, but the new strategic statement identifies raising standards as one of five objectives. The Education Development Plan has been approved and is an appropriate and comprehensive strategy for school improvement. Other statutory plans have been submitted in a timely way and following appropriate consultation with schools. The LEA's policy for special educational needs is being reviewed in the light of the Government's Green Paper. In 1998 the LEA increased provision for supporting pupils with behavioural difficulties to include more preventive services. However, a high number of pupils with behavioural difficulties are placed in schools outside the County. The amount of time allocated for the education of excluded pupils is too low.

Role and priorities

The Council's Strategic Statement

27. Plans and initiatives which tackle issues across the range of Council services are a relatively new feature in Northumberland, although several services are delivered to schools through arrangements with other departments of the Council. Elected Members and officers acknowledge that the Local Authority has never taken a corporate approach to planning although there is a growing awareness of the need to do so. Recently the Council has taken steps to address this by publishing a Strategic Statement. This statement identifies five objectives for 1999/2000:

- raising standards in education;
- regenerating Northumberland's economy;
- tackling disadvantage;
- promoting healthy and safe communities;
- setting a new agenda.

28. All priorities reflect the contribution of education. These priorities are too recent to be reflected in the Council's budget strategy. Very little consultation has taken place on the strategic statement, but the priorities for education are not controversial and receive wide assent. Recently the Education Department has set appropriate targets for the implementation of the Council's strategic priorities. The targets are broad in outline but bring together a number of existing initiatives and developments. These reflect priorities within the Education Development Plan together with wider priorities such as for youth, early years and community.

29. Regeneration is a Council priority. The Council has fostered a Strategic Partnership which develops some common objectives for a concerted and coordinated approach to regeneration. While this provides a detailed and appropriate framework for the Council services and other agencies to work together, it has still to be put fully into operation. Existing work to support economic and social regeneration by raising attainment and improving opportunity in schools includes funding from the Single Regeneration Budgets, Capital Challenge, the Training and Enterprise Council and more recently from the Health Action Zone. A bid to form an Education Action Zone has been submitted.

The LEA's School Improvement Strategy

30. Traditionally, the LEA has given a high priority to supporting improvement in schools and informing discussion of the curriculum by reference to local educational work as well as official publications. The Education Development Plan represents the LEA's first strategic plan and embodies these intentions in much greater detail. The plan represents an appropriate and comprehensive school improvement programme. It has five major strengths.

31. Firstly, the five priorities which have been identified for the period 1999-2000 are well-founded on an incisive and frank audit of schools' performance. The priorities are:

- improving Key Stage 2 attainment and progress;
- addressing variations in achievement;
- raising self esteem, motivation and aspirations;
- improving school management and development;
- improving teaching and learning.

32. Secondly, the plan establishes a distinctively local flavour. It has developed a relevant and local perspective, yet responded fully to national priorities. Each priority and its associated activities are audited to show how far the proposed programme meets the national requirements

33. Thirdly, action plans are clear and include sufficient detail. The activities included in the action plans, if implemented, are likely to meet the intentions of the plan. Fourthly, links are drawn between the different priorities and activities to develop a coherent and cohesive programme. Fifthly, the plan is realistically costed in a way which reflects current overall expenditure.

34. Schools have participated in drafting the Education Development Plan and this process has contributed to its success in engaging schools. It has acted as an optimistic sign to schools that the difficult and uncertain period associated with reductions in the budgets can be put aside, and the LEA's activities have become more focused on a clearer set of priorities. Headteachers of all but five of the thirty-three schools visited are at least reasonably aware of the LEA's priorities and 12 headteachers are well aware. Headteachers who do not share the high level of awareness faced pressing problems within their own schools. Not surprisingly, the general understanding of school staff was more patchy. Special schools, while approving of the priorities, had more difficulty seeing the applicability of the Education Development Plan to their context.

35. There is a strong consensus of agreement with schools on the LEA's priorities, which has been strengthened as a result of consultation on the Education Development Plan. Twenty-four schools rated the procedure for consultation on the Education Development Plan as good.

36. As an important aspect of delivering the Strategy for School Improvement, the LEA has promoted the development of school partnerships. The consistency of the three tier system provides a framework whereby 16 partnerships operate between the high school with middle and first schools. While there is some variation, they do so effectively. In three of the most effective partnerships, collaborative working is impressive and is important in determining common approaches to school improvement. Many developments are stimulated and sustained by the partnership headteachers. Nevertheless, over the past year, advisers have worked, with some success, at improving collaboration between schools in the less effective partnerships.

Other LEA plans

37. The LEA has submitted other statutory plans within the required timescales. The following plans have been approved: the LEA's strategy for lifelong learning; for early years; for the reduction in class sizes and behaviour support. The School Organisation Plan has been drafted. Overall, the plans reflect a thoughtful approach.

The LEA's strategy for special educational needs

38. Schools are generally aware of the LEA's special educational needs policy which makes a commitment to a continuum of provision, including special schools. The information published in the Education Development Plan about the LEA's policy on inclusion reaffirms a commitment to the principles of inclusion insofar as this is compatible with children receiving the special education provision they require, provision of effective education for these children, and the efficient use of resources. However, it has not gone so far as to set locally agreed goals for inclusion and reintegration. A working group, including headteacher representatives, is currently considering an appropriate way forward.

39. In the interim, a draft action plan has been drawn up by the LEA which has a well chosen list of 13 activity areas as priorities. This action plan addresses some of the current weaknesses. These include improving assessment procedures so that they are timely; criteria that are transparent and consistently applied; and reducing the high number of placements made for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties outside the County. Good progress is being made in implementing the planned developments in many activity areas.

40. On their own, these planned developments will improve existing practice rather than take forward the Government's policy for inclusion. Visits to schools illustrate that there is good practice. Four schools were visited which are resourced to educate pupils with special educational needs, and all but one supports pupils effectively. One very good link arrangement takes place between a first school and a Beacon Special School, but more generally the links between special schools and mainstream schools, which had existed in the past, have ceased.

The LEA strategy to improve behaviour and discipline in schools

41. The LEA has a sound behaviour support plan. It includes a detailed audit of a range of relevant performance indicators. These highlight the comparatively low level of unauthorised absence and permanent exclusions, the doubling of the recorded number of fixed term exclusions over the last two years, and the relatively high number (56) of pupils attending expensive out-of-county special schools that provide for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

42. The LEA seeks to provide a continuum of support, ranging from advice to special school placement. In 1998, the LEA increased its provision by adding a Behaviour Support Team of seven teachers, targeted at pupils at Key Stage 2, and a Pupil Referral Unit targeted at pupils at Key Stages 3 and 4 who are at risk of exclusion. However, there are still some gaps in the continuum of provision for emotional and behavioural difficulties, including specialist provision for primary aged pupils and in-school support for secondary aged pupils.

43. The LEA has plans to replace its existing residential special school for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties with a new, day special school. Implementation has been a lengthy process and has contributed to the high numbers of pupils who are placed in residential provision outside the County. In addition, the intake of two LEA special schools has changed and includes a greater proportion with emotional and behavioural difficulties. This presents particular difficulties in one school, where the changes have not been supported by sufficient training and advice.

44. The Behaviour Support Team has had a positive impact on improving pupils' behaviour in five of the first schools and one of the middle schools visited. The establishment of the Pupil Referral Unit has raised expectations in some high schools which, in the view of the schools, are not met. The unit has good accommodation and staffing. The provision is designed to help schools prevent exclusion, and therefore - to be successful - needs to work in close cooperation with schools. It is a new unit, but many of its arrangements are still unclear to schools. In particular, admissions criteria are not understood, and therefore decisions to refuse to admit are often misinterpreted.

45. Insufficient provision of two hours home tuition is made for pupils who are excluded from school. The LEA accept that this is inadequate and has made unsuccessful bids for increased growth of funding to improve this position. The LEA works with other agencies such as the Guidance Company (formerly the Careers Service), the Training and Enterprise Council, and Colleges of Further Education to deliver alternative packages of education and training to disaffected Year 10 and 11 pupils.

46. The LEA's strategy for support for improving behaviour is effectively planned but, in practice, the required communication and coordination of effort between the component parts, such as special schools, the Behaviour Support Team, the Pupil Referral Unit and alternative curriculum provision in Key Stage 4 are not sufficiently strong.

Consultation

47. Schools have recognised more openness and willingness on the part of the LEA to involve and to consult with them over recent developments. In the past, consultation was typified by the sharing of information. Generally schools have valued this opportunity to participate. The number of meetings of different partnerships and groups proved difficult for some headteachers who urged, with some justification, for some rationalisation of consultation groups. Headteachers whose schools are at some distance from Morpeth (where most meetings are held), or who have teaching commitments, have found it difficult to contribute as fully as they would want. Overall, relationships with the LEA are constructive and are built on the necessary degree of trust. Headteachers did not express any suspicion or mistrust about the way in which the LEA conducts its business.

48. Steps have been taken to ensure elected members have a more direct dialogue with governors at Area Advisory Committees. The meetings are well-prepared and seen as valuable to the participants, although knowledge of the working arrangements and discussions is at best hazy outside of those who participate.

Monitoring and evaluation

49. The culture and practice of monitoring, review and evaluation of LEA initiatives and services are as yet not fully developed. Elected Members have not had a policy of reviewing the performance of the LEA's services in any formal way. Nevertheless, sub-committees are formed to monitor the progress of schools requiring special measures and these have enabled Members to take part in monitoring a recovery strategy for those schools. A monitoring and scrutiny sub-committee has considered the development of performance indicators to determine and monitor the progress which has been made in implementing the priorities in the strategic statement.

50. Officers would argue, with some justification, that reductions in the budget for central services and consequent loss of staff have left the senior management and service managers too thinly spread to concentrate sufficiently on issues which are either not immediate or essential. Nevertheless, most services draft annual reports, but the rigour and usefulness of the evaluations varies. For instance, the LEA's central inservice programme is evaluated through regular consultative groups with school partnership representatives and by participants at the point of delivery. These latter responses are collated but without any commentary which uses the findings to highlight issues for improvement.

51. Recent service level agreements drafted for services, such as Repairs and Maintenance, do not always include measurable service specifications. It is, therefore, unclear how schools will monitor the contract. A strategy for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the school improvement programme is included in the Education Development Plan. The strategy is more rigorous as it involves school staff, governors and outcome measures related to measurable success criteria. Each priority will be the responsibility of a team leader who will convene a steering group which will monitor progress. It is proposed that an annual report will detail progress. This will be discussed by the appropriate committee of the Council, the four advisory committees and governing bodies. The success of this

will depend on whether the findings of the evaluation will be used to fine tune the developments as they take place.

Statutory Duties

The LEA takes reasonable steps to meet statutory responsibilities.

Funding

The LEA has faced reductions in expenditure from 1992 to 1998. Funding for schools is low and schools rate the fairness of the formula as less than satisfactory. Too many high schools have budget deficits and the LEA has worked with these schools to make reductions. Three LEA budgets can become demand-led and management information systems for these critical areas are not well developed. Ten per cent of money which is not delegated to schools is controlled by other local authority departments. Developments for Fair Funding have led to some specification of services but these are still too imprecise.

52. No significant changes have been made in recent years to Northumberland's scheme for the Local Management of Schools because of concerns among councillors, governors and heads not to shift a higher burden onto any one phase when the total budget was being reduced. Incremental budget changes have altered the original balance between pupil led and lump sum funding. Larger first and middle schools and smaller high schools are now relatively under-funded compared with other schools. In the school survey, a majority of schools rated the fairness of the Local Management of Schools scheme and the allocation of funding to schools as less than satisfactory. This was confirmed by the school visits. Schools have low funding overall but few headteachers are content with the distribution through the formula, which is not regarded as transparent.

53. Overall school balances were 4.6 per cent in June 1998. However, nine high schools were in deficit at the end of 1997-8, three significantly so. Where it has been possible for the LEA to make structural changes in the organisation of schools to alleviate difficulties, the LEA has acted. Education officers and schools support officers have supported schools to balance their budgets or retrieve deficits. Schools are dealt with on a school by school basis. The difficulties are often more general and have already been identified in a number of High School OFSTED Section 10 inspection reports, and include the better costing of the school development plans and addressing relatively expensive sixth form structures.

54. The pattern of spending on elements over which the Council has retained discretion has largely been the product of an annual roll-forward of the previous years' budget, with such cuts or elements of growth as are decided at the Council's budget setting meeting. Successful attempts have been made to minimise the impact of the cuts, for instance by putting the music and outdoor education service on a self-financing basis. However, the Council has not adopted an overall strategic budget plan and does not plan budgets for more than one year at a time.

55. An annual budget report used to be presented to Education Committee but spending within individual budgets is not scrutinised regularly by Members. Management information systems for critical budget areas are not well developed. Most budgets are clearly assigned to a member of staff and expenditure monitored by the finance officer. In three budgets which can become demand-led — special educational needs, home to school transport, together with the budget for education repairs (albeit this is controlled by another department of the Local Authority) — outturn was above the original budget. In these cases, financial management is not adequate. Officers are given a base budget and expenditure monitored to provide early warning of overspending. They are not given cash limited budgets or the final budget responsibility for maintaining expenditure within the budget.

56. Ten per cent of the money which is not delegated to schools is controlled by departments other than education. This had led to weaknesses because there are no internal service level or formal agreements on the standards of service that the Education Department can expect or on the costs. Neither is the allocation of corporate overheads clear. This has been a weakness as it is not clear whether the Education Department is getting value for money.

57. Preparation for Fair Funding means that the actual costs of many of these services now will have to be identified and apportioned prior to delegating to schools. A series of working groups involving headteachers and governors have looked at the services and a portfolio of proposed service level agreements has been sent to all schools. Due to tight timescales nationally, information on amounts to be delegated in 1999 was provided only three weeks before decisions were required. This gave schools inadequate time to investigate alternative providers and make informed choices, particularly when, as in the case of property related services, schools were required to buy the contract for a three year period. Details on the cost of services to be delegated in 2000 are not yet fully available.

58. The County has been relatively successful in recent years in securing grant aid. However, responsibility for coordination, promotion and supporting school bids for grant funding is not clearly defined within the Education Department, and neither is there always support within the Chief Executive's Department which schools can access.

Admissions and school places

Whilst there are difficulties because of the rural nature of the County, the current strategy to reduce surplus places is insufficient.

59. In 1997 the District Auditor reported favourably on the management of admissions and the information provided for parents. Information to parents remains clear and well presented and the appeals process is efficiently run. The number of successful appeals has increased in recent years. The admissions policy was reviewed with these problems in mind in 1998 and has been changed to increase the importance of catchment area and of planned progression. The expectation is that this will reduce the appeals.

60. The planning and management of school places is weak. The District Auditor had concerns about the accuracy of detailed forecasting of pupil numbers to first schools and the number of unfilled places in some schools, even allowing for the needs of a sparsely populated area. A further review is due this year. Officers accept that there are still difficulties about the accuracy of pupil forecasting, particularly for first schools, and because of the unpredictability of sixth form numbers.

61. The LEA last reviewed places in 1995, and determined, after consultation, and in the light of extensive public opposition, not to close any schools. The District Auditor concluded in his 1997 review that "the Authority needs to move forward the planning of its strategy for surplus place removal as a priority". Reviews of surplus places have been carried out on a local basis with only two partnerships to date. A recently agreed proposal which will close two Blyth High Schools and open one new High School will reduce surplus places in one area in the high school sector. Minor building works and changes to mobile classroom funding will remove others. While recognising the constraints on reducing the surplus places which are imposed by the widespread and rural context of the County, this approach will not be sufficient to tackle the difficulty.

62. In line with new legislation the LEA has prepared a School Organisation Plan and has set up a School Organisation Committee. Schools have found the plan helpful, as for the first time they have projections of their future rolls. The plan predicts falling rolls for the majority of first and high schools. The plan complies with statutory requirements.³

Liaison

Liaison with the Training and Enterprise Council, the Guidance Company, the Diocese and the Health Department are good and appropriate steps are being taken to improve liaison with Social Services.

63. The school survey shows that schools consider liaison between education and social services to be satisfactory in first schools and less so by the middle and high schools. Strategically, the Social Services and Education Department have made progress in developing joint strategies and appropriate structures to support them. However, liaison between services, social workers and teachers is still too variable.

64. The LEA has very good working relationships with the Northumberland Guidance Company, and the Training and Enterprise Council. The Guidance Company plans and delivers training for careers teachers, workshops and an annual careers fair. Pump priming funds for projects such as Aiming High has had a beneficial impact in two schools. The Training and Enterprise Council has supported the development of NVQs and GNVQs and invested £200,000 every year on an education team to work with schools.

³ Since the completion of the fieldwork for this inspection, the LEA has initiated a review of the School Organisation Plan with an intention to remove surplus places.

65. The Area Health Authority directly provides health promotion functions and commissions the school nursing service from the local trust. This service is highly valued by schools. A variety of partners link together in drug prevention initiatives. A defined priority of Promoting Healthy Lifestyles is included in the Education Development Plan which will link up with the Northumberland Health Action Zone's seven year plan.

SECTION 4: THE MANAGEMENT OF SERVICES

The management of the Education Department

The Senior Management team provides good leadership for the Education Department but staffing, particularly in the Education Support Division, is low and officers are over-stretched. Poor Information and Communication Technology has not supported the collection and use of sufficient management information. Schools are able to access the services they require although some teaching heads of small rural schools find it difficult to participate in training and consultation meetings.

66. The senior management team of the Education Department (which consists of the Director of Education and the three heads of divisions) meets on a regular basis. They provide good leadership for the Education Department. The three divisions are based on different sites but liaison, communication and coordination are satisfactory.

67. The management of services and responsibilities for functions are allocated to these divisions in a rational but unusual way. Services to support pupils with special educational needs are included in both the Standards and Effectiveness and Education Support Divisions. Management services, including buildings, repairs and maintenance, legal services and information and communications technology are provided by Local Authority Services and are largely outside the management of the Education Department. Financial support is provided about equally by the Education and Finance Departments. The Education Department is responsible for most of the advice on personnel issues, using the Personnel Department as a source of expertise in particularly difficult cases.

68. The Standards and Effectiveness Division has an appropriate management structure. The scope and range of the strategic responsibilities of the Education Support Division are very great. This Division has a quasi-team structure. Officers, including for special education needs and school support, are deployed to area teams. Some degree of specialism is still required for such functions as management of special educational needs, therefore specific area teams also have specialist responsibilities and these cut across all the teams. Despite its complexity, schools have no difficulty in accessing appropriate services. Each school has a named school support officer who provides the first point of contact. The work of the support officers is highly valued by schools and they work successfully to ensure that schools have access to relevant local authority departments and sections, irrespective of the actual divisional structure and responsibility.

69. Taking into account the size and complexity of the authority, particularly in the Education Support Division, staffing at second and third tier management level is low and over-stretched. The LEA has complied effectively with all recent statutory requirements and actions. However, issues which are longer term or may not always be immediately necessary or are not statutory, have to take their turn and cannot always be tackled with sufficient speed.

70. In addition, the Education Department has insufficient flexibility to provide effective monitoring to identify problems at a sufficiently early stage or to investigate the feasibility of a necessary range of different options. Poor central information technology systems for administrative purposes increase the difficulty since this considerably restricts the management information which officers can use. This causes acute difficulties when the Department has to manage a large scale project of local significance, for instance such as the reorganisation of the Blyth secondary schools or devising better management and control of the arrangements for home to school transport or develop policies and procedures to promote social inclusion.

71. Schools make heavy use of the LEA's services. Even where budgets are delegated there has been very little shift to contract services apart from those of the local authority. Schools have, however, valued and used the opportunity to compare the LEA services with those which are available on the competitive market. In some cases, such as grounds maintenance and curriculum and management support and advice, they have exercised their right to do so.

72. High buy back rates are not only a product of the effectiveness of the service which the local authority provides. In part, geography contributes, in that there are few alternatives; also very little money is available for schools to purchase other services. Many headteachers question whether their time is profitably invested in looking further afield. This puts the LEA in a favourable but highly responsible position of virtual if not total monopoly. It is perhaps for this reason that some of the Local Authority's services, in particular Repairs and Maintenance and information and communication technology, have not developed their procedures sufficiently to take account of the school as the customer and the client or have not developed better methods of monitoring and evaluation.

73. In a County of this size, with an uneven distribution of population, the deployment of support is logistically challenging. Both the Standards and Effectiveness Division and Education Support Division deploy support through the same four "area" groupings of school partnerships and which are co-terminous with the Area Advisory Committees. This deployment of services in this co-terminous way has advantages and provides more potential than is currently used.

74. All the area teams and support services are centralised and based in the south east of the County. Schools in the more distant areas feel that they do not benefit from the same access to support and partnership as do schools in the south east. The combination of distance and teaching commitment make attendance at daytime meetings difficult for teachers and headteachers. Sometimes this is over-stated by schools. The isolation of some teaching heads and schools in the North of the County is confirmed by the judgements of inspectors, who found both the use and effectiveness of support significantly lower than elsewhere. Similar concerns have already been raised in Section 10 school inspection reports. Some attempts have been made to improve this. In total, the proportion of meetings held outside Morpeth and the incidence of school-based and partnership-based training, are still small.

The Inspection and Advisory service

Staffing of the Inspection and Advisory Service provides good specialist coverage of the subjects of the curriculum, although the balance and priority for generalist and specialist inspection and advisory support is not clear. The Service Level Agreement for the Inspection and Advisory Service provides flexibility for schools and they make good use of it. Support is deployed in inverse proportion to success.

75. This service is appropriately staffed in terms of numbers and subject specialisms. Two staffing features are notable. Two headteachers are seconded annually who, because of their recent and relevant experience, provide highly effective and credible advice and support, mainly to schools causing concern. Secondly, an administrative support section led by an education officer vests responsibilities for administration of the Division with appropriate personnel and helps to prevent advisers spending time inappropriately on these functions. Among other responsibilities, this section coordinates the standards fund programme and other externally funded programmes.

76. The service can cover most curriculum specialisms with the exception of Art. Specialists in technology, music and religious education combine this work with other responsibilities. Arrangements are made to purchase support for these subjects from consultants when required. The balance between secondary, middle and first school specialists has improved in recent years to include more first school specialists.

77. The service has considered the skills and expertise which it requires and has made efforts to attract advisers who have generic skills and who can engage schools in issues related to the school improvement strategy. However, in practice, the balance and priority between specialist curriculum support and the generalist role of link adviser are still not clear enough within the service nor with schools. Some work has also taken place to expand the portfolios of support which can be provided by existing advisers. In view of the developments planned through the Education Development Plan and new government priorities, this may not yet have gone far enough.

78. The service operates a service level agreement with schools and buy back rates are high. Ninety-one per cent of schools access the service and the service recovers 75 per cent of the amount of funding which was originally delegated. Twenty-nine per cent of the service budget depends on Standards Fund and other income targets such as conducting OFSTED inspections although this is a decreasing commitment. Roughly a third of the total budget depends on school purchase. The terms of the service level agreement have evolved over the years. In the last two years at the highest level of purchase, access is flexible and unlimited, based on the schools' requests for support. This flexibility is valued by schools, and most schools make very good use of its potential.

79. The service does not have a business plan or service development plan although some of the shifts in staffing and expertise which will be required to support and implement the Education Development Plan have been identified. Work is

taking place to deploy the service to manage and support the activities included in the Education Development Plan. Each Senior Adviser has taken responsibility for managing and monitoring at least one priority. Advisers have been allocated to the priority team and notional allocations of time have been agreed. It is not yet clear to schools whether or how the implementation of the Education Development Plan will interface with the service level agreement.

80. The evidence of the schools visit confirms that Northumberland generally deploys its advisory support in inverse proportion to success. With the exception of schools' causing concern, support is often "light touch" but sufficient to encourage development in many schools. Schools and governors are not propped up but are actively assisted to exercise their responsibilities in an appropriate way.

81. Fostering the schools' responsibility for school improvement is not always understood. Some schools still expect the LEA to continue to exercise leadership over areas that it has neither the resources nor responsibility to continue to do. This approach, too, is not sufficient in all schools, especially when schools do not give rise to concern but have too limited staffing and management resources or too specialised a need to respond effectively.

82. A number of ways of monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the service are being developed. These are low key and not always sufficiently rigorous to eradicate inconsistency or determine future developments. Monitoring of the Service Level Agreement has recently been reported to the Education Committee. The report provides useful information on the scope and take-up of activity but no evaluation of impact, of the schools' perceptions of the value, or of reasons why a small minority of schools had not purchased the service.

83. A common system of appraisal is in operation across the Division which includes regular workload, deployment and quality of work reviews every half team with Area Senior Advisers.

Other services which promote access and achievement

The Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs is implemented well, although the completion and issue of statements is still too slow in one third of cases. Statements of special educational needs are mostly clear and are regularly reviewed. The Educational Psychology Service, Education Welfare Service and services for sensory impaired children are effective.

Assessment of pupils with special educational needs

84. An area team within the Education Support Division fulfils the key responsibility for special needs administration. The leading officer combines this responsibility with oversight for an area support team.

85. The Code of Practice is well-established in schools but the proportion of statements (64%) which have been issued within the advisory time limits remains unsatisfactory. Nevertheless, appropriate action has been taken to increase the number of statements issued within advisory time limits, but this has not been

sufficient. Procedures have made decisions on referral, assessment and provision for statements more transparent and consistent. A panel decides which pupils to formally assess and whether to issue, maintain, amend or cease to maintain a statement. Criteria have been devised to ensure that decisions are clear at Stages 4 and 5 but no criteria have been devised to guide schools' decisions on Stages 1-3 of the Code of Practice. Statements are generally clear and provide useful guidance. The LEA monitors the completion of annual reviews.

Educational Psychology Service

86. The Service fulfils the LEA's statutory duty of providing psychological assessment. Its performance against Code of Practice timescales of completing assessments is variable: 1996/7 - 81 per cent; 1997/8 - 67 per cent; 1998/9 so far 76 per cent, with a target of 90 per cent. It also spends 38 per cent of its time contributing to annual reviews of pupils with statements, which are attended by an LEA representative in one third of cases.

87. The service's staff of 8.5 FTE educational psychologists is distributed to school partnerships according to a formula, but schools are not aware of the way in which this operates. Each school receives a minimum of one annual visit. The quality of the support provided is good but the amount is insufficient to meet the needs and demands of many schools.

Support services for sensory impairment

88. Services which support pupils with hearing, visual and communication impairments are all of high quality in the schools visited.

The Education Welfare Service

89. Attendance in schools is good and is better than that found nationally. The Education Welfare Service is small in size and costs are low, nevertheless the key indicators reflect that it is an effective service. It analyses the needs of schools using data on authorised and unauthorised absences and other indicators such as numbers of pupils on roll, numbers of exclusions and numbers of pupils eligible for free school meals. It ensures that the LEA's statutory duties are met in relation to attendance and uses its statutory powers to prosecute parents as a last resort. It has occasionally and, in the short term, successfully used techniques such as truancy sweeps and concentrated visiting patterns to raise awareness in particular areas.

Management Services

Management services which are provided by other Council departments have more weaknesses than strengths. Personnel services are effective. While the repairs completed by property related services are satisfactory, customer consideration is insufficient. Planned improvements in Home to School transport are being implemented too slowly. Information and Communications Technology for management and administration in the Education Department and schools is very poor.

Home to School transport

90. This is a major service in the county used by approximately 12,000 pupils at an estimated cost in 1998/9 of £5.2 million. The County has a policy agreed in 1997. Prior to 1997 there was no accurate pupil or provider information and insufficient management of the budget and the service. An action plan has been drafted to rectify problems and improvements have been made on the schools' side.

91. As yet there is no Code of Conduct for contractors or regular spot checks on health and safety. No system is in place to review routes and contractor costs regularly. Starting from November 1999, the county public transport team and information and communications technology services will work with the Education Department whereby a regular pattern of network tendering and contracting will be undertaken. In view of the cost of the service, developments are too slow. The County cannot yet be sure that they are balancing the needs of entitled pupils with an efficient and effective use of resources.

Property related services

92. Limited recent expenditure on repairs concerns schools. While they are generally happy with the service they do receive, there is a lack of customer consideration. Contractors do not routinely contact schools in advance and ensure that the timing of visits is convenient. The service relies on the tendering process to deliver value for money - there is no formal system of quality control or performance targets which are regularly reported.

93. Annual consultation on repair and maintenance programmes has stopped and schools have had little say over priorities before the consultation over New Deal for Schools. There is no condition survey of premises on which to base priorities, although the Council has received a grant from the Standards Fund which will allow an up-to-date property survey as the base for its Asset Management Plan.

94. Additional funding was delegated on 1 April 1999. Schools have been offered an insurance scheme equivalent to the sum delegated, which they are required to sign up to for three years. The scheme has been designed in order to meet the needs of schools in the worst repair rather than the different needs or preferences of individual schools. It is not clear how schools will be able to monitor value for money.

Financial services

95. One Education Officer, with support from the Education Finance Section, is responsible for the Local Management of Schools Formula. Financial services are provided by the Treasurer's department. Payroll services are provided by the County Secretary's Department. There are no existing service agreements between this service and the Education Department or with schools. An uncosted service level agreement has been drawn up for 2000.

96. Schools generally regard the support provided by the support officer for the planning and control of school finances as satisfactory. Three year implications, assuming no change in funding, costs and pupil numbers, are projected for schools. Payroll works effectively and a newsletter helps to keep school finance staff up to date with technical issues.

97. Information and communications technology to support budget management and administration is very poor. As a result, external budgetary control for schools relies on paper-based systems which creates the following difficulties. There is no "on line" budget check available. Monthly paper printouts are not always up to date, are not user friendly, and have to be manually reconciled. The central coding system is not useful for schools. In-school budget control depends on schools having a separate effective internal commitment system and being accurate in their own predictions on income, pupil projections and potential problems. Support Officers compare actual Form 7 figures as against projections in September and this constitutes the only routine external monitoring during the year.

Information and Communications Technology Support for Management and Administration

98. Poor systems for Information and Communications Technology have a detrimental effect on the management and administration of the Education Department and schools. These effect not only communication with schools in the isolated and distant areas, but also the extent to which performance data can be used to drive school improvement. This is a cause of frustration and annoyance to schools who understandably feel that, in this aspect, they are falling behind. Some schools have bought their own alternative hardware as they are no longer prepared to wait for a new system from the LEA.

99. The Council has agreements on the hardware which will be used, but has not devised an information strategy. The current corporate arrangements for the development and management of information and communications technology do not work. There is a corporate officers' steering group which reports to an Information Technology Steering Group but no longer has a corporate budget. Each local authority department has to allocate growth for funding from its own budget while continuing to bid for additional central information technology staff time.

100. Schools are not sufficiently clear about the implications, training and timescales of the up-grading of equipment and software, which is planned between Autumn 1999 and 2001, and which will start in High Schools. In addition, there have been serious problems and delays with the development of information and communications technology for supporting innovative teaching and learning projects funded under Capital Challenge. These difficulties have diminished confidence even further. In these difficult circumstances, discussions about the future delegation of funding to support information and communications technology will be delayed until the equipment has been updated.

101. At the time of the first stage of this inspection, there was no budget to upgrade the systems within the Education Department to match those which are to be used in schools. The Education Department has only one member of staff who supports the

use of all existing equipment and also prepares some statistical analyses. Low staffing, together with the out-of-date equipment which is not compatible with schools, severely limits the extent to which the Education Department can establish a secure base of management information and performance data.

Personnel services

102. The School Survey shows that schools regard the support which they receive for personnel as highly satisfactory and advice on personnel issues is mostly expert and effective. Currently these services are not devolved to schools. A service level agreement offering one option has been drawn up for 2000 but costs are yet to be determined, as the authority has still to consider the strategic costs.

SECTION 5: LEA SUPPORT TO SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

103. In total 33 schools were visited. All 14 first schools visited have made some improvements. These are significant in half the schools. The eight middle schools visited have all improved in some aspect and in two schools this is significant. In the seven high schools improvement is less notable. One school has improvements in key aspects of management and literacy. Four schools maintain the good or very good overall standards. Two schools are satisfactory but remain much as they were at the time of their inspection. Improvements have taken place in all three special schools.

PERFORMANCE DATA AND TARGET SETTING

Access to a more secure and timely source of local data which references performance to other similar schools and partnerships is now developing. However, the approach to target setting in schools is not secure. The awareness of the value of the approach has been raised. Its use to identify and manage improvement is now well established. So, too, is the principle and also the practice of the exchange of data between schools and tracking the performance of pupils as they progress through the key stages.

104. The LEA's provision of data has improved in quantity but still has some further improvements to make before it is as timely and coherent as the description in the Education Development Plan. Support for the process of target setting is not yet effective. The use of the LEA's performance data was inspected in 31 schools. Nineteen of the schools had made improvements from their inspection, although for many schools, very little development had taken place at the time of the inspection. The use and analysis of data to set targets and stimulate school improvement are better in middle and high schools than in first schools and special schools. In nine schools, including four first schools and three special schools, the analysis and use of data and target setting procedures are unsatisfactory. Special schools are at a very early stage and are beginning to set individual pupil targets at annual reviews.

105. This is an area in which the LEA would concede that it has made relatively slow progress, for reasons that are not entirely within its control. No data unit was in existence a year ago, and the appointment of its head took some time. The failure of bodies other than the LEA to deliver commissioned data to the required quality or by the agreed deadline has undermined the credibility of the LEA's efforts to encourage intelligent data use. Worse, it has harmed its overall strategy. The LEA had intended, using normative assessment, to check progress in reading at Years 2, 4, 6 and 8, but this has only become possible this year.

106. The systematic use of performance data is not, by any means, unfamiliar to Northumberland schools. Baseline assessment is well established. The LEA has issued analyses of subject differences for some years - and has used them to target subject advice. Most of the high schools make some use of ALIS, YELLIS and, less frequently, MIDYIS; a few make excellent use of data.

107. The quality and comprehensiveness of data which are circulated to schools is improving. A suitable range of data has been circulated recently to schools but not in time for schools to analyse and use in the setting of targets. However, the analysis is issued without interpretative text. The lack of written analysis and the presentation of the LEA data have proved confusing to many first schools who need much more training in its use.

108. Targets have been established in all schools but they vary considerably in their realism and therefore in the extent to which they are likely to be met. Nevertheless, all schools have developed some useful practice but as yet this is fragmented and does not constitute a clear and coherent system across the LEA. Generally there are some common difficulties. There is a widespread confusion about the difference between a forecast and a target. Some schools have sensibly started from looking at individual pupils' attainment and projecting the reasonable progress and collating the results to identify the target. In some small first schools this is the only reliable method. However, larger schools have not always completed a sufficiently thorough analysis to identify and add to the forecast the estimated potential for improvement throughout the school. Middle schools have been heavily reliant on the assessments of their feeder first schools. These have not been complemented by an analysis of the trends in attainment in the middle school itself. Targets have resulted, therefore, which exceed the current overall attainment by as much as 15 per cent.

109. In other schools there has been an element of playing safe and not including a component of challenge in the target to reflect general school improvement. Added to this, the shortfall between the LEA and schools' Key Stage 2 targets was managed by some constructive and good humoured bartering between the LEA and its middle schools which has led to some increase in the targets set by individual middle schools. However, this bartering was fairly indiscriminate and involved at least two middle schools which had conducted diligent and effective methods for setting targets. One of these schools has amended targets to a higher level but without any real conviction that the target will be attainable.

110. Data interpretation is part of the role of the link adviser, but the discussion between the school and the link adviser is intended to be only marginally about the validity of extrapolations from data. Much more time should be spent discussing the validity of the school's strategies for school improvement which arise from the data analysis. However, link advisers have been supportive, optimistic and gathered information rather than being challenging and instructive. They have been too ready to accept schools' analyses and the targets which they had set; rather than insisting on a thorough analysis and ensuring that the targets include both forecasts and challenge through identifying the improvements which the schools can make. Hence errors in targets, which pose too high a degree of challenge to be realisable or which have an element of playing it safe, have not been challenged and schools have not been called upon to justify their approach. Link advisers have training needs of their own.

SUPPORT FOR IMPROVING STANDARDS OF LITERACY

LEA support is “light-touch” and includes training and written guidance which is generally effective and is good value for money. Few schools required more support, although monitoring is not yet consistent and some first schools require reassurance.

111. The LEA's audit of school performance shows that literacy is not the LEA's most pressing problem, hence it does not feature as a separate priority in the Education Development Plan. However, it is a separate activity within the priority, “addressing variations in achievement”. In the 1998 national tests for 11 year olds, 64 per cent of pupils achieved at least level 4 in English compared with 65 per cent nationally. The LEA has set a realistic yet challenging target, aiming for 83 per cent of 11 year olds to achieve at least level 4 in the 2002 national tests - exceeding the national target of 80 per cent.

112. The LEA is providing effective support to first, middle and special schools in the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy. All schools visited were successfully implementing the strategy in full. Improvements in pupil attainment had taken place in 12 out of 23 schools; in three, significant improvements had taken place. There was only one instance of unsatisfactory progress - in that case the support required by the school was more than currently provided. Strengths observed included high quality planning, the careful matching of work to pupils' needs, the use of a wide range of excellent resources and lessons taught by enthusiastic teachers. The three special schools visited had received good support from the consultants and English adviser.

113. The management of the National Literacy Strategy and the National Numeracy Strategy is the responsibility of one senior adviser, guided by a literacy steering group and supported by two literacy consultants. The Literacy Action Plan, which drives the consultants' work, is detailed and ambitious. It does not, at this stage, reflect a detailed audit of pedagogy. However, the visits to schools showed that teachers are planning and including the full range of the required activities, including phonic work, within lessons.

114. Training for the literacy strategy has been well received by headteachers, literacy coordinators and governors. At least ten out of the 23 schools visited reported that the main shortfall in provision was the lack of emphasis on mixed-aged teaching with insufficient tailoring of the training to meet the needs of its smaller first schools. However, a good deal of written guidance has been issued to schools, including detailed guidance on the teaching of mixed-age classes.

115. Support from the literacy consultants is highly regarded. Only two schools visited required more targeted support than they currently receive. Overall, ten schools have been designated for intensive support based on analysis of data and advisers' advice. Additional support is provided when a need has been identified. Effective support ranged from helping with the development of the school's literacy action plan, advising on books for boys, observing lessons, setting literacy targets and intervening to support a school experiencing difficulty. One particular example of good practice was a consultant working with a middle school to develop some joint

Year 4/5 work on non-fiction to be used with feeder first schools. Termly meetings for literacy coordinators in first and middle schools were judged to be useful.

116. Support for literacy comes from a number of sources. At least ten schools visited subscribe to the Schools Library Service and all but one valued the service provided. Support included the provision of extra resources which, in one case, “transformed” the school’s library. The Special Educational Needs literacy team provides individual help to Year 3 pupils who are falling behind and this was observed in two schools. It was effectively developing pupils’ literacy skills. Schools’ link advisers assist schools to set literacy targets and also monitor the delivery of the strategy. The link advisers have been provided with training. Monitoring has not consistently taken place. Some first schools required more reassurance about their current developments.

117. The literacy strategy has understandably, to date, had little impact upon the high schools. High school heads of English have regular meetings which they consider useful. Recently they were provided with information on the literacy strategy and observed the teaching of a literacy hour. Two high schools ran literacy summer schools for Year 8 pupils transferring to them.

SUPPORT FOR IMPROVING THE STANDARDS OF NUMERACY

Schools are being well-prepared for the implementation of the National Numeracy Strategy.

118. Implementing the National Numeracy Strategy is an activity within the LEA’s Education Development Plan priority “Addressing Variations in Achievement”. This is appropriate as pupils’ attainment in mathematics is slightly better than that found nationally although significant variations between schools exist. The LEA has set challenging targets for numeracy. In 1998, 57 per cent of pupils achieved at least level 4 in the Key Stage 2 National Curriculum tests; by 2002 the LEA expects 80 per cent of its pupils to reach at least level 4 - this is above the national target of 75 per cent.

119. The LEA recently distributed to schools its action plan for the implementation of the National Numeracy Strategy from September. Schools are aware of the LEA’s strategy for raising attainment in numeracy and most are clear about the ways in which good practice are to be disseminated. All but four of the schools visited were aware of the LEA’s Numeracy Action Plan and only two schools were unclear about the level of support that they would receive. Although intensive support is targeted at those with greatest need, at least four of the schools visited will require more than a “light touch” if standards of attainment are to be raised. However, more positively, the LEA has successfully supported one school to improve the quality of teaching, thereby allowing support next year to concentrate on the implementation of the numeracy strategy.

120. Two numeracy consultants and ten leading mathematics teachers have been appointed and trained. Training sessions for first and middle school heads, numeracy coordinators and governors on the implementation of the numeracy strategy have begun. The numeracy training features good joint work by the

consultants and the advisers. This has been very well received, and is very well organised and well prepared. Three schools at least have already started to implement the numeracy strategy ahead of the starting date.

121. The first twenty schools to receive intensive support have been identified through an analysis of data and discussions with advisers. The LEA strategy requires schools receiving intensive support to disseminate good practice amongst their partnership schools which will further enhance the commitment of schools to meeting their own individual targets. The LEA has successfully raised the awareness of high schools of the implications for them of the introduction of the national numeracy strategy in first and middle schools.

SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS CAUSING CONCERN

Very few schools cause concern. The LEA has the capacity and expertise to improve schools and can do so in a timely way. Support provides good value for money. Identification of the schools is appropriate, but in the past, schools were not identified at an early enough stage. Schools are not sufficiently well aware of the implications of new procedures.

122. The number of schools which require or have required special measures and have serious weakness identified in OFSTED inspection is low. Since 1993 OFSTED identified three schools requiring special measures and since 1997 two schools with serious weaknesses. One school was removed from special measures after nine months and the two primary schools with serious weaknesses have been visited and have made good progress.

123. The LEA has had procedures to identify and support schools giving rise to concern for a number of years. Between September 1997 and January 1999, the LEA identified 19 schools as giving rise to concern. Of those 19, nine have been resolved; five have improved but continue to receive increased monitoring and support, and five continue to be of concern.

124. The new proposals incorporated in the Educational Development Plan provide an appropriate and more formal structure. The proposals outline a stepped procedure of five stages which incorporate at stage 4 the issuing of a formal warning. At the time of the inspection sixteen schools are identified at stage 1 and four schools at stage 2 or above. In addition two schools currently require special measures and one school requires some enhanced support prior to closure.

125. Twelve schools were visited which had been identified as causing concern at some time since 1996. These included the school which no longer required special measures and one of the schools which had been deemed to have serious weakness. It also included four schools which are identified on stage 1 of the new procedures; all of these schools were receiving additional support for a second time.

126. Five of the schools, three under new headteachers, have improved in a number of areas. The remaining schools' improvements were more limited in scope, but apart from one school no further deterioration had occurred. In eight of the schools support was sufficient in relation to the school's needs and effective in all but one school.

127. The identification of the schools is appropriate. A broad range of data and evidence is used to help to identify schools including, for instance, feedback from the governors' clerking service. However, under earlier procedures the LEA had not identified the difficulties at a sufficiently early stage in six schools and in four schools difficulties had been identified but intervention was not sufficiently prompt. In one school effective support has led to improvement, but there is still an outstanding difficulty which requires a more incisive approach if it is to be solved.

128. Once problems have been identified and the decisions to intervene have been taken, initial support is brokered through area teams. Each school has an appointed coordinator who has the role of identifying and contracting the support which is required. The package of support is invariably well-planned, effective and realistically costed. Schools received additional support for short periods and in only two schools for twelve months or more. In seven first and middle schools, including schools requiring special measures and those with serious weaknesses, the additional support effectively led to radical improvement in a very short time.

129. Two seconded advisory headteachers work for most of their time supporting schools causing concern. They receive a substantial induction programme from the advisory team. This helps to ensure the effectiveness of their work, which is excellent and supports rapid improvement in the identified schools. In five first schools and one middle school the weekly work of advisory headteachers had been essential in leading to improvements. In another first school an experienced acting headteacher provided excellent leadership when the school's difficulties coincided with an OFSTED inspection. The advisory headteachers often help schools to prepare detailed plans which coordinate and phase support from a number of advisers. In six schools, the LEA had supported governors in making appointments of new headteachers and in one school secured an early release from an existing appointment. In all cases these headteachers have been successful in developing more purposeful and well organised schools.

130. In the four schools currently identified and placed on Stage 1, headteachers, although generally constructive about the process, are uncertain about the intentions. The new procedures state the "LEA will.... bring the nature of the concern, along with any evidence, to the headteacher who will be asked to respond and indicate what action they intend to take". This is not understood by the schools, who have expectations of a greater degree of LEA support. In addition, in two schools the difficulties have been identified for some time and the schools have expended their own strategies for improvement and therefore, may be inappropriately placed on the first step. Nevertheless, overall, the support provides good value for money.

LEA SUPPORT TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF TEACHING

LEA support is effective and provides good value for money. The inservice programme is well used and effective in first, middle and special schools. Consultancy for subject specific developments is confident and effective. The induction of newly qualified teachers is satisfactory but the appraisal of teachers and headteachers has largely lapsed. Advice to school management on monitoring the quality of teaching is patchy.

131. Support to improve the quality of teaching is comprehensive and effective, and provides value for money. This was inspected in 31 schools. OFSTED school inspection found that the quality of teaching in first schools is in line with national standards and better than that found nationally in middle and high schools. This is supported by the visits to schools for this inspection. In 14 out of 31 schools the standard of teaching is improving and only in one school has teaching some unsatisfactory features. LEA support was at least satisfactory in relation to need in 27 schools and good in 12 schools. Similarly the support was effective in 24 schools and highly effective in ten of these.

132. The programme of inservice training makes a major contribution to maintaining and supporting improvements in first, middle and special schools. It is heavily and effectively used by all but two first, middle and special schools. In these schools this programme made up at least 50 per cent of the school's inservice training and in most middle and first schools nearly 90 per cent. Discussions with teachers and observation of their lessons in first and middle schools showed that the courses had been effective and confirmed the details of the evaluation conducted by the LEA. High schools are more selective in their use of inservice training. Two high schools did not purchase the service level agreement and used the programme for about ten per cent of their inservice training compared with 50 per cent or above in all other high schools which were visited. As in most other LEAs, training for the literacy and numeracy strategies has made a beneficial contribution to improving teaching.

133. The programme is efficiently organised, although course evaluations show that schools are not always satisfied with the information which they receive about a course. The widespread nature of the County can also inhibit the ability of teachers to take up courses. Attempts have been made to use alternative venues in different areas of the County. Schools in Berwick reported that, disappointingly, some of these courses had had to be cancelled because of a lack of support. Nevertheless schools were visited for this inspection where headteachers and teachers found it difficult to take part in training as they would have wished. Although more infrequent, schools have benefited from training when it is organised for the whole school or partnership. This overcame some of the difficulties of accessibility but also enabled courses to be tailored to meet specific requirements. These are valuable developments ensuring that the training programme is relevant and accessible, but these still represent a small percentage of the courses which are offered overall.

134. A comprehensive and successful programme of training for school staff has resulted in the effective implementation of the Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs. This has been complemented by helpful and informative

guidance, Special Needs Individualised Programme Planning (SNIPP) 2000, which has been widely used to draft practical but clear Individual Education Plans. A significant number of special needs learning assistants have received training, sometimes on award bearing courses which they have attended in their own time. Distance learning packages for teachers to use with support assistants are used, but despite the good quality are not well known in many schools.

135. Most first and middle schools made use of consultancy for particular subjects provided in school by advisers and advisory teachers. High schools' use was more selective, although nonetheless there were examples of valuable work, such as support from the post-16 adviser for the introduction of GNVQ in one school and support for modern foreign languages in another. Subject specialist support generally proved effective and there were visible illustrations of the improvements which had resulted. From schools' written comments in the Audit Commission's school survey, the advisory support for mathematics and early years is perceived by schools to be highly effective. For all other subjects, the responses are mixed but no subject was perceived as consistently weak. Curriculum projects such as Thinking Skills in Humanities and Making Sense of Science had been taken up by some schools, usually middle schools, whereas, surprisingly, other schools had never heard of the work.

136. The LEA has an intention to encourage all teachers to invest in their continuing professional development and realising this ambition will depend on improving the schools' policies and procedures. The programme of link adviser monitoring visits includes discussion on approaches to improve the policy and school systems of continuing professional development and promoting school self review. Schools have been encouraged to use the Investors in People standard to improve their procedures and about 40 schools have achieved this award.

137. In-school monitoring of teaching is inconsistent across schools. Advice to school management on monitoring the quality of teaching was patchy. Very few schools had systems which are regularly used although about seven schools had taken steps to get advice. Appraisal has lapsed in most schools. Schools also received good support to improve the teaching skills of weak teachers.

138. As an aspect of wider responsibilities, the LEA has designated an adviser with responsibility for oversight of the induction of newly qualified teachers. Training courses are run for mentors followed by a day's course for newly qualified teachers. In the Autumn Term 1998 mentors were invited to a session on Career Entry Profiles.

139. Most newly qualified teachers had attended a twilight meeting followed by a day's course. In all cases the day course had proved helpful. Although not consistent in all schools, some teachers had been observed teaching by advisers. The programme is minimal but satisfactory and does not differ from that provided by many other LEAs nationally.

140. Improving the quality of teaching and learning is a priority in the LEA's Education Development Plan. The activities are diverse and build on the strengths of existing work and reflect Northumberland's needs. Information and

communications technology is a major activity to enhance innovative teaching and learning projects. School developments are supported by good written guidance on how to develop a school policy, development plan and a scheme of work.

SUPPORT FOR IMPROVING THE MANAGEMENT AND EFFICIENCY OF SCHOOLS

New training materials have been drafted on financial and development planning but have not yet been circulated to schools. The link adviser system has more potential to support school improvement than is currently developed. Link adviser visits which have focused on the monitoring and implementation of development plans have not always rectified weaknesses in schools' plans. Currently there is too great a separation between advice on the management of the curriculum and schools improvement, and financial monitoring and support. Support for school self-review and evaluation is not consistently effective. The Management Training programme has been redesigned to meet national standards. The induction of headteachers is good.

LEA support for school planning and improvement

141. The LEA has targeted the need to improve financial and development planning within its Education Development Plan. OFSTED inspections judged development planning as satisfactory in only half of middle and high schools and two-thirds of first schools. In 12 of the schools visited development planning is good, but in six it is unsatisfactory or poor. Only four out of the seven high schools and one of the special schools visited had plans that are at least satisfactory. The unsatisfactory plans provide insufficient financial information, a lack of measurable success criteria, inadequate monitoring and they omit clear timescales within which actions are to be completed.

142. In 1995 schools received guidance on the planning process and more recently further guidance material has been drafted which will form the basis of new training materials. This has not yet been distributed to schools and will not be in time to coincide with this year's planning cycle.

143. Twelve of the schools visited have received support on the mechanics of the planning process and 15 have been given guidance on developing their strategy for improvement. Although link adviser visits to schools in the spring term were targeted at monitoring the implementation of development plans only, 13 schools acknowledged that their plans were being monitored, the majority with a very "light touch".

144. Twenty schools had received a pre-OFSTED Inspection visit and most found this at least useful. Support took a variety of forms depending on schools' needs and included lesson observations, analysis of documentation, scrutiny of pupils' books and presentations to staff and governors.

Support for management

145. The first cycle of OFSTED Inspections found that the management and efficiency of first schools is broadly in line with national percentages but with a lower proportion of schools judged to be very good. In middle and high schools management and efficiency is largely similar to the national picture with a marginally higher proportion of schools judged to be good.

146. Support for school management was inspected in 29 schools; 12 of these were judged to be improving. Support is more effective in first and middle schools than in high schools. Generally, however, support to improve management in schools is not as confident and substantial as the support which is provided to improve the quality of teaching. In particular, historically there was too great a degree of separation between support on financial planning and budget management, and advice on the management of the curriculum and school improvement.

147. A more formal structure to the link adviser monitoring visit has been designed and has been in operation since September. The system is new and the requirements of the visits are still being considered by the service and schools. It is intended that the visits will fulfil the LEA's monitoring role and will consist of up to a maximum of six half days annually. While this is high, it is not inappropriate while a new system is becoming established, but will need to be refined to reflect the needs and effectiveness of the schools and to target those schools which, while they may not be causing concern, do not have the staff or resources or capability to manage their own improvement effectively.

148. At this early stage the system has greater potential for school improvement than is currently developed. Early strengths include the preparation for the visits which is clear and appropriate; the agenda and proforma for the visit are shared with schools well in advance and enable them to make effective preparations. With only two exceptions the schools visited have valued and appreciated the regular contact with an adviser. However, the extent to which the visits have stimulated schools to do things better and differently is very limited and may not at this stage be delivering value for money.

149. Three main problems emerge. Firstly, the quality and value of the support which is provided by the advisers varies from good to unsatisfactory. This indicates that the investments which are currently made to equip the advisory service to tackle the general issues of school improvement and to monitor the consistency of support are not yet sufficient. Secondly, the agenda is not negotiated with the school and is determined exclusively by the LEA. While it is clear that the LEA will need to monitor a number of issues consistently, the visits did not always tackle or identify the most pressing problems within the schools. Thirdly, few schools are clear of what the adviser had judged that the school needed to do as a result of the visit. The findings of the visits are feedback orally to schools. A written proforma is drafted which includes recommendations for further action. At present the schools do not receive a copy of this.

150. The management training programme has recently been redesigned and is now based on national standards. Although tightly focused, it has the potential to meet the needs of most senior managers. Senior managers in four schools identified difficulty in attending management courses due to either their heavy teaching commitment, lack of funding for supply cover, or distance to the course venue. Schools which have taken advantage of the LEA's flexible school-based management in-service provision had found the sessions valuable; topics covered included the role of key stage coordinators, the role of middle managers in school improvement and school self-review. Similarly, middle and high schools valued the annual conference for senior managers.

151. The induction programme for new headteachers is good; in particular, the mentoring of newly appointed heads by trained headteacher mentors is a strength in the LEA's management support programme. However, in common with the national picture, acting headteachers or those new to the authority on second headships are not included in these arrangements and are not consistently offered additional support.

152. As yet self-review and evaluation procedures are not consistently developed. Schools are at different stages. A few schools have exemplary procedures. A self-review pack developed on the initiative of the LEA has been "dipped into" by seven schools, has not been used at all by nine schools and was considered of only rudimentary use by a further three. Not all schools include the monitoring of teaching in their self-review process.

Support for Governors

Support for governors is effective and provides good value for money. School support officers provide effective advice to governors and the clerking of meetings is widely regarded as helpful. Governors receive good advice on appointments. Governor training is good quality, appropriate in content and courses are well received. The role of the link governor is not sufficiently well promoted. The work of the Area Advisory Committees is not well understood and governors do not always receive feedback on the discussions.

153. LEA support for governors is light touch, effective, low cost and provides good value for money. Governors and senior managers have high regard for the effective work undertaken by the school support officers; in only one case was there a significant criticism and this was being remedied by the LEA. Schools found support officers knowledgeable in dealing with personnel and financial issues, well briefed on topical issues and able to direct managers "to someone who knows" on the occasions when they were unable to deal directly with an issue. Irrespective of whether the support officer or education officer clerked the governing body, their contribution was seen as invaluable. Briefing meetings of headteachers and chairs of governors were also well regarded.

154. Good advice and support is given to governors on the appointment of headteachers and deputies. Whenever possible, the Director of Education personally advises most governors' panels on headteacher appointments. Support is also available on request for other staff appointments. Administrative help, the

placing of advertisements and guidance on interview procedure are all cited as examples of good support provided by the LEA. Very occasionally governors feel unsupported when they have to tackle serious personnel issues. However, the number of examples of good support in similar situations outweigh those in which governors have been critical of the LEA.

155. Governors have a good understanding of the LEA's priorities for education as a result of consultation on the Education Development Plan and the distribution of papers at governors' meetings. Governors at three first schools feel overwhelmed by paperwork, which in one instance is described as too lengthy and unclear. Governors, rightly, would welcome an information digest or regular newsletter to help them keep up-to-date on new educational initiatives and developments such as fair funding.

156. Although modest in scope, the training available to governors is of good quality and courses have been well received. In particular, governors referred to the high quality training they had received on the national priorities of literacy, numeracy and target setting. Other well regarded training included the induction course for new governors and advice on classroom observation. Although attempts are made to provide venues for training around the county, some governors still have difficulty attending. Other schools have received effective school-based training which overcomes the travel problem and enables courses to be tailored directly to the needs of particular schools. The, now annual, governors' conference is very well regarded by governors.

157. There are only 12 vacancies for local authority governors. This is very low. The role of the link governor is not promoted sufficiently by the LEA. Three chairs of governors interviewed did not understand the term, three governing bodies did not have a named person fulfilling the role and a further three had an inactive link governor. In only 15 of the schools visited were link governors perceived to be active and effective in their role of promoting training.

158. The work of the Area Advisory Committees is viewed as either irrelevant or ineffective by 14 governor representatives with a further eight admitting to a lack of clarity or understanding of the role of these committees. Feedback to governing bodies is undertaken inconsistently. Two partnership groups are considering establishing a chair of governors group which should overcome occasions of poor communication about the work of the Area Advisory Committees.

APPENDIX I CONTEXT OF THE LEA

(a) Characteristics of the pupil population

Indicator	Date	Source	LEA	National
1. Number of pupils in LEA area of 1997 compulsory school age	January 1999	DfEE Form 7	49,115	
2. Percentage of pupils entitled to 1997 DEE free school meals	1997	DfEE Form 7		
i. primary			20.2	22.8
ii. secondary			13.9	18.2
3. Percentage of pupils living in households with parents/carers	1991	ONS Census of Population		
(i) with Higher Educational qualifications			13.2	13.5
(ii) in Social Class 1 and 2			30.9	31.0
4. Ethnic Minorities in population aged 5-15. Percentage of ethnic group:	1991	ONS Census of Population		
Asian			0.1	0.5
Bangladesh			0.1	0.8
Black African			0.0	0.6
Black Caribbean			0.0	1.1
Black Other			0.1	0.8
Chinese			0.1	0.4
Indian			0.2	2.7
Other			0.2	1.1
Pakistani			0.1	2.1
White			99.1	89.9
5. Percentage of pupils:	1997	DfEE		
(i) with a statement of SEN				
primary			2.7	2.6
secondary			3.6	3.9
(ii) attending special school		DfEE		
primary			1.3	1.1
secondary			2.0	1.6
6. Participation in education:	1997/8			
(i) % pupils aged 16 remaining in full time education.			66	not known

1b Organisation of schools

Number of:	Number
Nursery schools	1
First schools (4-9)	143
Middle schools (9-13)	45
High schools (13-18)	16
Special schools	9
Pupil Referral Units	1

2. Pupil/teacher ratio

	Year	LEA	National
Primary	1997	24.5	23.4
Secondary	1997	18.6	16.7

3. Class size

rate per 1000 classes

Size of class	Year	LEA	National
31 or more KS1	1997	377.4	289.6
KS2	1997	523.8	379.0
36 or more KS1	1997	41.1	22.9
KS2	1997	129.8	35.0

4. Surplus places

Schools with more than 25% spare capacity

%	Year	LEA	National
Primary	1998	23	9.5
Secondary	1998	27	11.5

5. Finance

Table 5.1 - Northumberland has spent at or just above SSA for the past six years

	1994/5	1995/6	1996/7	1997/8	1998/9	1999/2000
Education SSA (£m)	105.9	103.9	109.8	114.4	123.3	129.3
Education spend (£m)	107	110	113.3	115.1	123.3	130.2
Spend as % of SSA	101.0%	105.9%	103.2%	100.6%	100.0%	100.7%

Source: Northumberland County Council

Table 5.2 - The percentage of funding delegated in Northumberland is close to the average

	1996/7	1997/8	1998/9
ASB in thousands of £	87,127	88,220	91,981
PSB	95,647	96,268	100,577
GSB	115,708	116,455	121,299
ASB as % PSB	91.09%	91.64%	91.45%
National average		91.00%	
PSB as % GSB	75.3%	75.75%	75.83%
National average		75%	

Source: Section 122

Table 5.3 - Except for under fives, the amount of money from the ASB spent on different ages of pupils is relatively low

	Spend on under 5s		Spend on primary aged pupils over 5		Spend on secondary aged pupils 11-16		Spend on 16+	
	1996/7	1997/8	1996/7	1997/8	1996/7	1997/8	1996/7	1997/8
Northumberland	1901	1874	1594	1547	1923	1912	2924	2914
County median	1854	1802	1655	1658	2177	2206	3125	3153
Median all England	1953	1942	1670	1746	2281	2365	3221	3308

APPENDIX 2: THE PERFORMANCE OF MAINTAINED SCHOOLS PUPILS' ATTAINMENT

1. Attainment at age 7 (Key Stage I)

	Year	% of pupils achieving Level 2 or above					
		Teacher Assessment			Tasks/tests		
		LEA	National	Difference	LEA	National	Difference
English	1996	84.8	79.3	4.0			
	1997	87.0	80.4	6.6	85.1	80.1	5.1
	1998	85.7	81.4	4.3	84.7	80.8	4.0
English (reading)	1996	82.3	78.6	3.7	82.0	78.0	4.0
	1997	85.7	80.1	5.1	84.4	80.1	4.4
	1998	84.7	80.8	4.0	81.5	77.4	4.1
English (writing)	1996	81.7	76.6	5.1	85.0	79.7	5.3
	1997	85.9	77.5	8.4	89.3	80.4	7.0
	1998	83.8	78.9	4.9	87.0	81.4	3.7
Mathematics	1996	85.7	82.2	3.5	86.0	82.1	4.0
	1997	88.7	84.2	4.5	87.6	83.7	3.9
	1998	87.4	85.5	1.9	86.6	84.8	1.8
Science	1996	88.1	84.1	4.1			
	1997	89.9	85.5	4.4			
	1998	88.9	86.5	2.4			

Source: DfEE

2. Attainment at age 11 KS2 tests/tasks

	Year	% Pupils achieving Level 4 or above					
		Teacher assessment			Task/tests		
		LEA	National	Difference	LEA	National	Difference
English	1996	53.4	56.8	-6.6	57.7	48.5	0.6
	1997	62.5	60.1	-0.8	63.6	57.1	0.3
	1998	64.8	63.4	-0.5	64.9	63.2	0.3
Mathematics	1996	57.5	54.5	-2.4	53.6	44.9	-0.3
	1997	63.5	59.9	-0.6	59.9	53.9	-2.1
	1998	64.7	64.1	-0.6	58.4	62.0	-0.1
Science	1996	64.5	64.5	-0.7	65.8	70.2	1.4
	1997	72.5	65.1	3.1	72.9	62.0	3.6
	1998	72.5	69.5	1.0	73.0	68.8	3.6

Source: DfEE

3. Attainment at age 14 KS3 tests/tasks

	Year	% Pupils achieving Level 5 or above					
		Teacher assessment			Task/tests		
		LEA	National	Difference	LEA	National	Difference
English	1996	63.9	60.3	3.6	56.5	55.6	-0.1
	1997	63.9	60.2	3.7	60.5	55.6	3.9
	1998	62.9	62.5	-0.5	63.6	58.0	-1.5
Mathematics	1996	69.4	61.5	7.8	61.4	56.7	4.6
	1997	69.6	64.0	5.6	63.8	60.7	3.1
	1998	67.3	63.9	3.3	63.5	56.4	3.69
Science	1996	66.2	59.7	6.5	63.4	56.4	6.9
	1997	69.3	62.2	7.1	65.7	60.8	4.9
	1998	66.2	62.4	3.8	61.2	56.5	4.6

Source: DfEE

4. Attainment at age 16 GCSE results in maintained schools

Level achieved	Year	LEA	National	Difference
1 A*-G	1996	95.0	93.9	1.1
	1997	94.6	94.0	0.6
	1998	95.8	95.2	0.7
5 A*-C	1996	46.9	42.6	4.3
	1997	44.0	43.3	0.7
	1998	45.5	44.4	1.1
5 A*-G	1996	90.8	88.1	2.8
	1997	89.5	85.5	1.0
	1998	91.9	89.6	2.3

Pupils aged 15 at the beginning of the school year and on the roll in January of that year

Source: DfEE

5. Attainment at age 18 A level results Average point score per pupil

Number entered	Year	LEA	National	Difference
2 or more	1996	16.7	16.8	0
	1997	17.2	17.1	0.1
	1998	18.0	17.5	0.5
Less than 2	1996	2.4	2.7	-0.2
	1997	2.4	2.7	-0.5
	1998	2.8	2.8	-0.1

Source: DfEE

6. Vocational qualifications of 16 to 18 year olds in maintained schools

Level Achieved	Year	LEA	National	Difference
Pass entries (advanced)	1996	76.6	79.5	-2.7
	1997	76.6	75.4	1.2
Pass entries (intermediate)	1996	57.2	69.1	-11.9
	1997	66.3	68.9	-2.9

The percentage of students who were in the final year of a course leading to approved vocational qualifications

Source: DfEE

7. Attendance

Percentage of pupil sessions:	Year	LEA	National	Difference
Attendance in Primary schools	1996	94.6	93.4	1.1
	1997	94.8	93.9	0.9
Attendance in Secondary schools	1996	92.5	90.5	2.0
	1997	92.2	90.9	1.4

Source: DfEE

Crown Copyright 1999

Office for Standards in Education

33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

Tel. 0171 421 6800

This report may be produced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that all extracts quoted are produced verbatim and without adaptation and on condition that the source data and date thereof be stated.

A further copy of this report can be obtained from the Local Education Authority concerned:

Education Department
Northumberland County Council
County Hall
Morpeth
Northumberland
NE61 2EF