



OFFICE FOR STANDARDS
IN EDUCATION

INSPECTION OF HALTON LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY

December 1999

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

CONTENTS	Paragraph
INTRODUCTION	1-3
COMMENTARY	4-10
SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT	
Context	11-13
Funding	14-15
Council Structure	16-17
The Education Development Plan	18-24
Allocation of Resources to Priorities	25-26
SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT	
Monitoring, challenging, supporting, intervening	27-35
Collection and analysis of data	36-39
Improving standards of literacy and numeracy	40-48
Improving standards of ICT	49-53
Support for schools causing concern	54-58
Support for school management	59-63
Support for governors	64-66
SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT	
Corporate Planning	67-72
School Infrastructure	73-79
SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION	80-89
SECTION 5: ACCESS	
The Supply of School Places	90-92
Admissions to Schools	93-94
Promoting Social Inclusion	95–104
APPENDIX: SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS	

INTRODUCTION

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

2. The inspection was based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA, on school inspection information and audit reports, on documentation and discussions with LEA members, staff in the Education Department and in other Council departments, and representatives of the LEA's partners. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on aspects of the LEA's work was circulated to 72 schools. The response rate was 75 per cent.

3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to 11 primary, five secondary and two special schools. The visits tested the views of governors, headteachers and other staff on the key aspects of the LEA's strategy. The visits also considered whether the support which is provided by the LEA contributes, where appropriate, to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in the school, and provides value for money.

COMMENTARY

4. Halton LEA was established as a small Unitary Authority in April 1998, having previously been a borough council within Cheshire. It is a predominantly urban, industrial area containing the towns of Widnes and Runcorn. Despite Runcorn being granted New Town status in the 1970s, the area has suffered from decline since that time and ranks in the top 10% of authorities in levels of deprivation and unemployment.

5. Generally, its schools and pupils perform well. Throughout their primary school years the majority of pupils are performing better than those in similar authorities and matching national averages. This is not sustained at secondary level when 10% of pupils leave Halton to attend Cheshire schools. At the age of 16, the proportion of pupils in Halton schools gaining five A*-C at GCSE is eight per cent below the national average.

6. Halton had an inauspicious beginning as an LEA. Both its Education Development Plan and Behaviour Support Plan failed to meet expectations. Its revised plans are now sound, it has increased its spending on education and it has made great strides in a short space of time in implementing support for school improvement.

7. The LEA is successfully carrying out the majority of its functions related to raising standards. It has developed a robust system for identifying schools causing concern and is supporting them effectively. No schools in Halton have been judged to require special measures. It has confronted difficult issues such as the removal of surplus places and has set challenging targets for schools. Strategic management is sound. However, its performance in fulfilling some functions relating to special needs and

access is poor and too few inroads have been made into a number of issues which require attention. Overall strengths modestly outweigh weaknesses.

8. Functions which are now exercised effectively include:

- support to help schools improve through:-
 - the provision of data for target setting and monitoring progress against targets;
 - raising standards in literacy and numeracy in primary schools;
 - identifying and securing improvements in schools causing concern or likely to do so;
 - supporting school management;
- reviewing and planning to remove surplus school places;
- provision of school infrastructure services;
- providing pupil support services for attendance and special educational needs.

9. Functions which are not exercised adequately include:-

- support for ICT in secondary schools;
- the strategic review of special educational needs, including:
 - communicating a clear policy statement on inclusion;
 - reducing out of Borough special school placements;
 - producing statements of special educational needs in time;
- managing admissions to schools;
- acting as corporate parent to looked after children.

10. After an uncertain start, when many key officers were not in place, the leadership and management of this LEA have matured quickly. Within 18 months it has successfully revised its Education Development Plan and Behaviour Support Plan. The first difficult but necessary steps to reduce the 15% of surplus places it inherited have now been taken. It has a sound strategy in place for school improvement.

11. However, the LEA has not yet thought through fully the implications of its role in support of largely autonomous schools. Most of what it does, it does well, but not all that it does will remain essential following the transitional period. This is particularly true of the advisory service, which is effective but overstretched. It has to consider rigorously the question of whether universal provision is either consistent with the principle of “intervention in inverse proportion to success” or immune to the accusation that it is an unnecessary distraction from the schools’ own responsibility for raising standards.

12. This LEA has the strategic management capacity and sense of role and purpose to deliver its school improvement agenda and take effective action on the recommendations made. In doing so, it should ensure that it fulfils its responsibilities as a parent and advocate of the most vulnerable.

SECTION ONE

THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

13. Halton is a predominantly urban area containing the towns of Widnes and Runcorn, situated on opposite banks of the River Mersey. Its chemical industry base has declined resulting in high unemployment and dereliction of land, ranking it in the top 10% of authorities nationally on the Index of Deprivation. Halton's population of 122,300 has a younger profile than the national average, but it has fallen gradually each year since 1990 because of net outward migration.

14. In January 1999 there were 21,558 pupils in Halton schools, of whom 30% in primary and 26% in secondary schools were eligible for free school meals: higher than the national average. Three quarters of all three to four year olds were attending maintained schools and all eligible four year olds were provided with nursery or reception class places.

15. The LEA currently provides 72 schools – four special, nine secondary and the remainder serving children in the primary phase. There was previously one grant-maintained secondary school which has returned to community status. Some key features of school and pupil performance are as follows:-

- at all ages, pupils in Halton schools perform as well as, or better than, pupils in schools in similar LEAs;
- the improvement in pupils' performance in Halton schools is at a faster rate than nationally: since Halton was established as an LEA, this rate of improvement has been sustained in test/exam results in 1998 and 1999;
- pupils' performance in Halton schools declines against the national average in the secondary phase; [10.7% of primary school pupils leave Halton for places in secondary schools, mainly in Cheshire];
- pupils in Halton secondary schools attain eight percentage points lower (37%) than the national average (45%) on the key indicator of the proportion of pupils gaining 5 A*-C at GCSE;
- rates of permanent exclusion and unauthorised absence are well below national and neighbour averages;
- no schools in Halton have been judged to require special measures; three are judged to have serious weaknesses.

Funding

16. In 1999/2000, Halton Council displayed its support for improving educational attainment by increasing funding above Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) and incorporating all of the 1999/2000 education SSA increase into the education budget.

17. Significant features of Halton's education funding since 1998 include:-

- the education budget set in 1998/99 was 0.9% (£510,000) below its education Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) and its subsequent expenditure at the end of year was 2% (£1.1m) below SSA;
- the 1999/2000 budget has been set at 0.5% (£295,000) above SSA and the Council has allocated an additional £726,000 over the next two years, from reserves, to support capital work in schools;
- funding for primary schools is above the national average: compared with its statistical neighbours, Halton delegates 8.2% more revenue funding per pupil than the average for primary schools, 3.7% more for secondary schools and 6.5% more for special schools;
- 81.2% of the local schools budget (LSB) is delegated. This is just below the average for all authorities in England (82.4%);
- centrally retained funds for school improvement are relatively low at £15 per pupil compared to £22 per pupil in statistical neighbours and a national average of £25 per pupil;
- funding per pupil held centrally for buildings insurance (£63) is by far the highest in England (average £11). The sum of £1.36m represents 12.6% of money not delegated to schools. This inappropriately includes a contingency as a revenue item of £500,000 and reduces the potential for further delegation of funds to schools.

Council Structure

18. Halton Council consists of 56 members (47 Labour, eight Liberal Democrat and one Conservative). The Council currently operates through four main committees, including Education. Each has a sub-committee structure. The work of the Education Committee is appropriately informed by the Consultative sub-committee and Quality and Standards sub-committee.

19. Halton is presently involved in wide consultation on how to modernise its structure and is likely to move to a 'cabinet' model in January 2000. The present committee structure is ineffective with too much time spent receiving and considering reports and not enough time on making or considering the effectiveness of policy. The proposed cabinet model is designed to promote more 'joined up thinking' and speedier, more accessible decision making.

Education Development Plan (EDP)

20. The LEA's initial EDP failed to meet the requirements of the Secretary of State. Following significant redrafting the EDP has now been approved for implementation from July 1999. The LEA, to its credit, has wasted no time in that implementation. The EDP forms the main part of the LEA strategy for school improvement within its Strategic Plan for Learning (SPfL) which is a broader document, including priorities other than school improvement and related action plans.

21. The priorities for school improvement defined in the EDP are to:

- raise standards in literacy;
- raise standards in numeracy;
- raise educational standards through the effective use of ICT;
- improve the quality of leadership, management and governance;
- promote social inclusion;
- support and challenge all schools causing concern.

22. These priorities are based on a thorough audit of performance and identify relevant targets for improvement that adequately reflect local needs and national priorities. The EDP sets out a sufficiently coherent programme to achieve these priorities. Most success criteria are clear and measurable. Monitoring and evaluation procedures are very thorough. Actions are clearly linked to the analysis and evaluation of strengths and weaknesses. There are exceptions, however, principally relating to teaching: links between the promotion of high quality teaching in the EDP and the associated priority in the SPfL are not clear enough. This is also true of priorities for curriculum development in the SPfL.

23. The LEA set its primary schools challenging targets for standards to be achieved in Key Stage 2 tests by 2000. However, these targets were set using limited data and before the LEA had appointed the staff to support the process adequately. There was a significant shortfall between the LEA's Key Stage 2 targets and the overall targets set by its schools. The EDP defines the actions the LEA is taking with those schools whose targets fell short. A range of sufficiently challenging targets were agreed with secondary schools.

24. The consultation process on the identification of the LEA's priorities and the EDP has been a particular strength; not only influencing the development of the EDP but also leading to a strong sense of ownership by schools and a corresponding commitment to the shared agenda for improvement.

25. All schools visited were aware of the LEA's priorities and approved of them. Headteachers of all primary and secondary schools felt the EDP priorities were relevant to those of their schools, reflecting the synergy developing between schools' own development planning and the EDP priorities. Outside of senior managers, however, few other staff in schools shared this level of awareness.

26. The current EDP concentrates principally on continued developments in support over three years. It does not yet model any staged reduction of central provision for

those schools that may prove themselves able to operate more independently of LEA intervention and support. Potential areas of buy-back, many identified in consultation with schools, are indicated for each priority across the three years of the Plan. But, neither they, nor any eventual brokering of its own monitoring and support role, are modeled in the EDP or other service planning.

Allocation of Resources to Priorities

27. Although within the EDP, resources are matched to priorities and targets, the Council's overall budget deployment is not based on analyses of outcomes against targets and expenditure. Each department, including education, has however been required to prepare a Best Value review timetable by October 1999 and undertake a base budget review. The LEA is developing benchmark information for schools covering staffing and budget patterns which it plans to circulate to governing bodies.

28. The Council works effectively on reviewing and developing its own services in conjunction with headteachers' advisory groups. It has not yet tackled the difficult issue of how it will assist schools in securing value for money for the services they may wish to buy including, in some circumstances, services which may be in competition with those of the local authority. The LEA acknowledges it is unable to provide a full range of in-service training opportunities but has not yet developed a coherent view on how it should "kite-mark" alternative providers.

Recommendations:

In order to improve further its strategic planning for school improvement:

- plans should be developed for the future role of the LEA as its schools become more able to support their own improvement, including the brokering of its own monitoring and support role to its schools. (Para 26)

In order to focus resources more actively and effectively:

- the level of central funding retained for buildings insurance should be reviewed and the financing at the Council's own risk should be covered outside the revenue budget; (Para 17)
- budget decisions taken by the Council should be informed by a structured and comprehensive analysis of priorities, outcomes and judgements of effectiveness of previous spending decisions. (Para 27)

SECTION TWO

LEA SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

29. The EDP sets the right priorities for raising standards in schools and the LEA is capable of delivering them. This is mainly due to two factors. Firstly, the effectiveness of the consultation process and the extent to which the LEA has secured the commitment of its schools to shared priorities for school improvement. Secondly, the

synergy created between the LEA's overall priorities and those of its schools, through the individual School Improvement Programme Action Plans (SIPAPs) and the intensive early work of the advisory service.

30. The advisory service has been highly successful in establishing its role in **monitoring, challenging, supporting and intervening** in its schools. The LEA's school improvement function is performed successfully. Inspection visits judged that, in all schools, the LEA was providing at least satisfactory support to help schools improve their capability to manage improvement. In half these schools the LEA had provided good support. The schools themselves also endorse this view. Nevertheless, even after such a short time, the advisory service is having to re-evaluate its working methods and use of its resources to ensure the LEA's priorities are delivered.

31. Halton spends less per pupil on school improvement than the national average. This is reflected in the size of central services delivering its priorities for school improvement, particularly in the size of the advisory service, which is made up of 11.5 professional staff, including six advisers, two advisory teachers and four consultants. The service is well managed: its work is comprehensively planned and scrupulously monitored and recorded.

32. The advisory service had only been at full strength for less than one term at the time of the inspection. It has achieved much in a short period. It has sensibly given priority to the key agenda of raising standards in the core areas of literacy, numeracy and ICT, and to helping schools to develop a secure basis for better self-evaluation, review, strategic planning and improved target setting. The timing and quality of some of its communications with schools, particularly in the first round of target setting and, more recently, in identifying schools causing concern, were not well managed. Whilst it has not shied away from robust action to implement LEA priorities, evidence from schools suggests that it is now moving, rightly, to supporting schools in defining their own needs and actions within shared priorities.

33. There is a price for this success of course, in the demands it makes upon both schools and the resources of the advisory service itself. The demands made on schools by the rigour of the SIPAP process and the degree of monitoring, particularly for those schools receiving additional support, can be high. Headteachers in two-thirds of primary schools visited reflected that, on balance, this had been a price worth paying for the improvements that were beginning to accrue.

34. The role of the link adviser is pivotal to the success of the LEA's strategy. All schools receive a minimum "entitlement" of three days (18 hours) regular monitoring visits per year. Schools in general commented positively on the work and expertise of link advisers and their emerging role as "critical friends". However, not all link advisers are equally effective in helping schools develop appropriate strategies to meet the targets set by the LEA.

35. The SIPAP operates as a comprehensive planning and monitoring tool for both the LEA and the school ensuring the most effective use of advisory service resources. Additional support, designated as "entitlement plus", is triggered by other indicators, for example, when the LEA considers the school has set insufficiently challenging Key

Stage 2 targets; by other priorities and activities within the EDP; or by other aspects which cause the LEA concern. Action by both the LEA and the school, with associated success criteria and outcomes, are usually clearly defined and provide a sound base for monitoring progress. This is not yet the case for all those schools formally designated by the LEA as causing concern, outlined in paragraphs 56-59. In addition, the SIPAP process is costly in advisory time, particularly in maintaining documentation.

36. The advisory service is already operating at a level where its own internal resources cannot sustain its current activity and deliver fully the LEA's priorities. It recognises this and has begun to commission packages of work from outside consultants. The LEA has calculated, carefully, that commissioned work will enable it to deliver its priorities and go some way to developing its intended role in brokering services to schools. There is no reason to doubt it, but the outcome is costly. For a service already stretched to the limit of its resources, the additional demands in co-ordinating activities in schools, in monitoring and quality assurance will be significant. There are also implications for the coherence of the support that schools currently value.

37. The advisory service has not yet begun to define clearly the criteria or indicators for a staged reduction of its level of support as schools become increasingly self-supporting. Nor has it yet looked at potential reductions in its intensive monitoring of its own work although it is being submitted as the first service subject to Best Value review.

38. The **collection and analysis of data** forms a key plank of the LEA's support for improving schools' evaluation of their own performance. There is now a clear and coherent strategy for improving the quality and range of data provided to schools, and for supporting them in their analysis of data to inform the setting of targets. As a result, the majority of primary schools and half the special and secondary schools visited felt better equipped to set more accurate and challenging targets in 1999/2000. Inspection evidence supports this.

39. This improvement was clearly necessary. The early experience of data analysis for Halton primary schools was problematic. The target setting processes conducted in primary schools in 1998 were not supported by sufficient data or adequate guidance on the analysis of the information available. In more than half the schools the LEA judged the school targets in English and mathematics to be insufficiently challenging. The LEA has now put in place much improved procedures for target setting in autumn 1999 for the tests in summer 2000. These give good, timely and comprehensive data to all schools including value added analysis and predicted grades to supplement the schools' own information from assessment and cognitive ability tests. Each school's performance is compared to the LEA results as a whole and, apart from Key Stage 1, each school is ranked in relation to other primary and secondary schools. Developments in target setting in special schools are at an earlier stage but there are promising developments in improving data and its use.

40. There are still further improvements to be made. Primary schools visited have generally improved their analysis of data, and most are beginning to use that data to set more secure and accurate targets for pupils. But there is not a common approach in how, precisely, schools are calculating the extent of 'challenge' in these targets.

Schools are not always receiving the right level of professional advice or guidance from all link advisers on the specific strategies needed to set higher, but still realistic targets.

41. The picture in secondary schools is more positive. The LEA has inherited long standing traditions of high quality data and analysis, and staff. It has built on this very effectively. However, the data and analysis provided to schools offer a range of possible GCSE targets, potentially leading to inconsistency in the basis for the targets being set.

42. **Improving standards of literacy and numeracy** are priorities in the EDP.

Key Stage 2 Test Results and Targets; Pupils Attaining Level 4 or Above			
	1998	1999	Target 2002
English	61%	67%	81%
Maths	59%	65%	76%

43. Indicative 1999 results demonstrate that schools have been successful, are showing improvement at a slightly faster rate than nationally, and are in touch with LEA targets for 2000.

44. Standards of literacy in eight of the 11 primary schools visited show significant improvement in English results in 1999: seven of these schools have received intensive consultant support. Three of the 10 schools receiving intensive support exceeded the LEA target for 2000 in their 1999 results. The LEA's literacy support has contributed to this success.

45. In relation to numeracy, mathematics results rose in 1999 in seven of the 11 primary schools visited. Three of these schools are receiving intensive support from the numeracy consultant. It is too early to judge whether the support is effective although the appropriate strategies are in place.

46. The management and implementation of the National Literacy and the National Numeracy strategies are based upon clear action plans for 1999-2000 and outline plans for subsequent years. The plans indicate actions to raise attainment in schools where it is low, to improve transition and progression from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3, and to raise attainment for underachieving groups, for example, boys in literacy. The literacy action plan has an appropriate focus on the teaching of phonics, writing in Key Stage 2 and guided group work. The numeracy action plan includes training which is appropriately targeted on mixed age teaching, special educational needs and the use of ICT in numeracy.

47. Overall the implementation of the literacy strategy has been managed satisfactorily. Evaluation of progress in the first year of the literacy strategy has informed practice and led to more effective implementation of the numeracy strategy. Although in their infancy, the monitoring reports on literacy to advisers and the bi-annual reports to the Quality and Standards sub-committee are an appropriate procedure for evaluation and improvement. No numeracy reports have yet been considered by

committee but staff are clear about the criteria on which to base the evaluation of their work.

48. The literacy and numeracy consultants each provide intensive support to 10 schools identified as having low attainment and unchallenging targets. Literacy support has shown considerable improvement following an uncertain start: guidance on numeracy is effective and of high quality. The support given is related to schools' needs and includes demonstration lessons, staff training, guidance on teaching and planning and advice on phonics, mental mathematics and curricular targets. All special schools have received good advice from the consultants to improve reading, writing and action planning plus access to training packs for numeracy. There has been little direct consultant support to secondary schools.

49. Initial three day literacy training by the LEA was reported as tedious and uninspiring and early meetings were poorly organised. Later training and support networks have been better focused on key parts of the teaching framework and the needs of schools. For numeracy, the LEA has provided high quality training for all schools. Fourteen of the 18 schools visited reported that the numeracy training was informative, relevant to their needs and effective in enthusing teachers.

50. The LEA has an appropriate balance of guidance and challenge to support primary schools in raising standards of literacy and numeracy. It also supported successful secondary summer schools in 1999: five in literacy and two in numeracy. Additionally, the LEA encourages partnerships for family learning initiatives and community literacy developments as part of a related priority to promote social inclusion. To support further improvements in numeracy, summer schools will be extended to more sites and funding is being sought to develop community mathematics projects.

51. A key component of the LEA's Education Development Plan is **to 'raise educational standards through the effective use of ICT'**.

52. The LEA has a draft ICT Development Plan which clearly links the literacy and numeracy strategies to the use of ICT, although it does not specifically set targets which define expectations for pupils and teacher skill levels. The LEA's ICT consultant was highly regarded but there was little evidence from the schools visited that ICT is helping raise standards.

53. The draft Plan identifies appropriate priorities and targets for local and national needs and deals with strategic and financial planning for hardware, software, staff training needs and sets expected standards. All primary schools visited had received a high level of support for ICT development planning and had an ICT co-ordinator and ICT development plans in place.

54. The level of support given in primary schools for Phase 1 of the National Grid for Learning is satisfactory. Each school has received personal computers and software. Training, although well regarded, has been at a basic level. In some schools the training preceded the establishment of the network infrastructure and there is little

understanding of how the infrastructure could be developed to assess pupils' attainment and progress and support their learning.

55. Secondary schools were being held back and frustrated by the slow pace of LEA development and were particularly critical of the speed of the LEA's intranet and overall network development. No secondary ICT co-ordinator had a clear understanding of the Phase 2 funding mechanism or how the Standards Fund budget for secondary schools of £180,931 was delegated.

56. Supporting and challenging **schools causing concern** is a priority in the EDP. It is a considerable achievement of this LEA, building on the work of its predecessor, that none of the LEA's schools are, or have been, in **special measures**. Three primary schools have been identified by OFSTED as having **serious weaknesses**. The LEA has identified a total of nine schools as giving cause for concern.

57. Each school designated as having serious weaknesses has made at least satisfactory, and in some respects good, progress with LEA support. This has been well targeted, within available resources, and is fully integrated into the LEA's monitoring and support programme.

58. The inspection visited seven of the nine schools identified by the LEA as causing concern. These schools are receiving effective support to improve those areas covered by the LEA's standard "entitlement plus" provision, but they are not always receiving equally effective support for all other areas defined by the LEA as causes for concern.

59. The LEA's monitoring and review procedures provide a generally sound basis for identifying schools in difficulties though one school with financial problems has slipped through the net. Its strategy statement is clear and complies with the Code of Practice on LEA-School Relations. However, the LEA is not always successful in meeting its own criteria for effectively supporting and challenging those schools giving it cause for concern. For example the LEA is not always clear or transparent in setting out the trail of evidence that has led to the designation of causes for concern. Nor has it built the success criteria and specific outcomes that will lead a school no longer causing concern into extended action plans. At present these schools do not have clear enough targets. Communication with these schools has not always been well timed, or correspondence clearly enough worded.

60. For the most part, **LEA support for school management** is effective. Link advisers are performing this role effectively and are well-regarded for their work with headteachers and the quality of advice and support they offer. However, there is no programme of headteacher appraisal in place, and insufficient support for middle managers, and particularly subject leaders.

61. Link advisers have begun to support headteachers and senior managers in undertaking their own observations of teaching of literacy and numeracy lessons in primary schools. This has not yet been extended to include subject leaders. Support for secondary schools has been more limited in scope and, so far, has had little impact. Link advisers are, however, beginning to work with the schools' own monitoring and staff development programmes in three of the five secondary schools visited.

62. Advice and guidance from management services are now clear and timely and senior managers are able to concentrate on the key job in hand, that of educating children, not on cumbersome administration.

63. Given the size of the advisory service, the LEA, sensibly, has not set out to directly provide support for curriculum development or subject teaching outside of the priority subjects in its EDP and the areas of the curriculum covered by the Advisory teachers. Schools themselves are responsible for meeting their other curriculum and development needs. The LEA's intention has been to develop a brokering role, providing schools with access to outside providers who meet its own quality assurance criteria. It acted expeditiously in its first year, centrally funding access to the Cheshire Professional Development Programme (CPD) for all its schools. In the current year it is brokering a service level agreement with the CPD which half the schools have taken up.

64. The LEA continues to disseminate information to all schools from major training providers in the area but its intended "portfolio" is still limited and information to schools on alternative providers remains too ad hoc and informal. It does not systematically monitor the quality of other providers currently used by schools. Early networks set up by the LEA to provide a forum for coordinators and subject teachers have often foundered. It has not yet established networks to disseminate good practice nor developed its brokering role sufficiently to meet its targets. Overall the pace of developments has been too slow.

65. LEA support for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) and their mentors is satisfactory. The LEA has a clearly defined policy in the EDP to support NQTs in its schools, linked to improving the quality of teaching. LEA support for NQT development is well sequenced with success criteria in place. In all schools visited the process was clearly understood by managers, a school-based policy was in place and the first training event had been well attended and received a mainly positive response. Appropriate opportunities are identified for school-based or externally accredited training for mentors. LEA monitoring ensures that statutory requirements are met.

66. The strengths of LEA support to **governors** to fulfil their roles and responsibilities outweigh the weaknesses. A 'Governor Development Programme' is sent to all schools annually, detailing the Service Level Agreement and the courses available. Although 75% of schools purchase the complete governor training and development package the take-up of governor training is poor.

67. The LEA's consultation with governors is good: an appropriate structure of meetings and distribution of information is in place and LEA officers are regarded by governors as accessible and responsive. This is reflected in the very high percentage buy back of the clerking service in primary schools and the direct support of link advisers to governing body meetings. The LEA is directly involved in the process of all headteacher and deputy headteacher appointments, and effectively supports and advises governing bodies on the decisions they need to make.

68. There are no published criteria, as required by the Code of Practice, for the appointment of LEA governors. This is of concern, given the sustained high number of 43 LEA governor vacancies: there are 110 in other categories.

Recommendations:

In order to improve LEA support for school improvement:

- the current working methods of the advisory service should be evaluated and, in consultation with schools, the service should identify:
 - criteria for schools that are able to operate more independently of LEA intervention and support; (Para 37)
 - consequent reductions in the type and levels of support required; (Para 37)
 - how good practice should be more effectively shared across schools. (Para 64)

In order to improve further the target-setting process:

- advice by link advisers on raising targets further in primary schools needs to be more consistent and probing, and based on current best practice; (Para 40)
- secondary schools should have more direct access to the quality and data manager, alongside link advisers in the target setting process; (and Para 41)
- in consultation with schools, a methodology to provide them with a more precise indicative target for GCSE performance needs to be identified; (Para 41)

In order to improve support for ICT:

- make more transparent the mechanism for delegating NGfL funding to schools; (Para 55)
- speed up its communication links development to support secondary schools. (Para 55)

In order to improve support to schools causing concern:

- the evidence and reasons for causes of concern should be more clearly explained and recorded; (Para 59)
- agreed targets and specific criteria and outcomes for removal from this category should be built into the school's action plan as early as possible. (Para 59)

In order to improve support for school management and governors:

- plans to support middle managers in undertaking observation of teaching and in developing schools' own monitoring procedures should be expedited; (Para 61)
- strategies should be identified to increase the take up of governor training, reduce the number of governor vacancies and publish criteria for appointing LEA governors. (Paras 66 and 68)

SECTION THREE

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate Planning

69. The Council's strategic management and planning of education are coherent. Improving educational attainment is an objective which forms a spine running through the Council's Community Plan and Corporate Plan into the LEA's EDP. It provides a focus for members who have ambitious aims for the economic regeneration of Halton. The Council's corporate strategy and how the Education Directorate's priorities are supported by Council priorities were clearly understood in 15 out of the 18 schools visited.

70. In its 18 months since becoming a unitary authority, the Council has produced 72 plans in response to demands from central government. This has proved a tall order for a small authority and the Education Directorate, which is responsible for 19 of these plans, has fallen short of expectations on two occasions: the EDP and the Behaviour Support Plan. Both have now been revised and are securely in place. Corporate and directorate planning systems are underpinned by divisional and sectional action planning. This is variable in quality, but reporting mechanisms are sound and encourage accountability.

71. Taking on the responsibilities of the local education authority functions from the county level has proved a steep learning curve for some elected members. They inherited the need to reduce the number of surplus school places. Both members, and the senior officers of the LEA, have displayed the necessary courage to tackle this issue. The Director of Education took personal charge of the consultation process, including the leadership of all but one of the 10 public meetings. Although local school and ward loyalties have proved a test for members during the process of public consultation, the Council has not been divided by party political dissent and has taken decisive action on this key strategic issue. In carrying out this function, and in the formulation of its statutory plans, the LEA has been open and consultative and made good use of the headteachers' and governors' forums which they have established for such purposes.

72. Another significant early initiative by the new Halton Council has been the joint development with school representatives of a costed, needs-based funding model for schools. This shows a commitment by the Council to fund schools according to agreed needs to raise standards and has been universally well received by schools. However the involvement of schools as major stakeholders in the process of determining and influencing overall resourcing decisions for the council has been minimal.

73. Although the council requires that all services undertake base budget reviews, there has been, to date, no rigorous procedure involving the Education Committee in examining budget variances. There is no formal method of bringing school budget deficits or significant items of spending (such as the out-of-Borough placement fee of £128,000 per annum for one child) to members' attention with sufficient prominence or speed.

74. The Council has been successful in bidding for external funds such as the Single Regeneration Budget and 'Sure-Start', which focus on priorities in the Education Development Plan. However, the LEA support for schools in accessing other sources of external funding to promote school improvement is not as well developed.

School Infrastructure

75. Halton has delegated to schools the funding for management support such as finance and personnel services. There are good linkages between these central services and the LEA's school improvement function.

76. **Financial** support for schools is good. Over 90% of schools buy back the financial support service: it is highly effective, and it is matched appropriately to schools' needs. Although there was an initial period of adjustment and some difficulties, for instance, with coding and reports, the service has responded well. Termly meetings of school clerks and bursars arranged by the council have been helpful in managing systems and procedures. Payments are made promptly and schools receive their budget notification on time.

77. Where the support service is bought back by schools, monitoring of budgets is good but it is less secure where it is not and where there has been little tracking of budgets. The problem was highlighted this year by one school not being identified as having a deficit in its budget of over £80,000 until the middle of July, well after the end of the financial year. The agreed scheme for financing schools requires the submission of budget plans by 31 May. The LEA had not finalised a licensed deficit arrangement and a recovery plan by the beginning of October 1999. Two schools require agreed plans to manage deficits this year, but only one is currently in place.

78. The number of schools with significant end of year balances is too high: 37 schools out of 72 have balances in excess of five per cent of their budget of which 10 schools are in excess of 10 per cent.

79. **Personnel** support is good: it is provided by experienced staff who maintain close contact with Halton schools. All schools buy-back the personnel service from the local authority. In all but one of the schools visited the service was rated highly by all who had occasion to use it. Governors and heads felt well supported by the quality and timeliness of advice in areas of difficult casework.

80. Support for **ICT for school administration** is provided in-house and all schools subscribe to the package. Staff are well regarded and the feedback from schools is consistently good, notwithstanding the frustrations experienced in some quarters over technical difficulties. From 1 October 1999 all primary schools have been linked to a borough electronic mail system; it is intended that all secondary schools will be linked in February and March 2000. The LEA has not yet however established protocols to safeguard against additional electronically generated bureaucracy.

81. The **building** stock in Halton's schools is in good condition and has been well maintained: the LEA has made good progress in preparing its Asset Management

Plan and is currently consulting schools on its draft policy statement. The local authority has completed a full buildings condition survey, including an asbestos survey, for all community schools and is currently completing similar surveys for voluntary aided schools. Headteachers and governors of schools visited are aware of their responsibilities and do not have any major concerns about building condition issues. The LEA has worked successfully with its schools in implementing the Key Stage 1 class size plan and its strategy to reduce surplus places will leave only 21 teaching spaces in mobile “temporary” classrooms.

Recommendations:

In order to improve financial planning and budget monitoring:

- schools should be involved in formal and timely consultation about the budget and its application to the council's priorities; (Para 72)
- members, and officers should be better informed about school budget deficits and surpluses. Budget deficit removal should be planned within an agreed timescale and governing bodies encouraged to use surpluses in a timely way to promote improvement in pupils' attainment. (Paras 73 and 78)

SECTION FOUR

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (SEN)

82. The LEA has been conducting a major review of special educational needs since December 1997: even at that stage it had identified that the pattern of provision it was about to inherit was not suited to its needs. In addition to gaps in provision to support pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties, it had a high proportion of pupils with statements (5.2%) and, at 58%, too low a proportion of statements being produced within the timescale.

83. Reports on the review and consultation have been submitted to the Education Committee on five occasions, and a small number of appropriate initiatives have been taken during this period such as the revision of its policy and the establishment of an extended panel for referrals for formal SEN assessment. However, the LEA has made too few inroads into many of the issues requiring attention. One weakness, the delay in statutory assessments, has actually worsened. Targets set by the LEA for improvement in the issue of statements and control of their numbers are too modest.

84. In order to follow the LEA's policy of consultation, three working groups representing interested parties have been established to produce proposals for key developments such as fresh criteria for the issue and discontinuation of statements and for entry to the Stages of the Code of Practice for SEN. These groups are due to report in January 2000, and further action will follow in April 2000. This is an undue delay in addressing the long-standing requirements for development. There is no evidence, as yet, of the extent to which any developments will support school improvement.

85. Although there is an overall policy statement promoting inclusive education, which is reflected in the Education Development Plan, there is no clear statement as to how levels of inclusion are going to increase. Neither LEA officers, nor schools, particularly the four special schools, were clear about how this aspiration was to be implemented in practice.

86. There has been no review of special school provision despite the unbalanced inheritance from Cheshire of two all-age schools for pupils with severe learning difficulties (SLD), one with half its pupils from an adjoining LEA, and a special school for pupils with physical disabilities with a potentially overlapping population of pupils with severe disabilities. The headteachers of the schools for pupils with SLD have been invited by the LEA to prepare suggestions about the future role of their schools. The schools recognise the need for review, and the fact that the LEA's attention is focused at present on mainstream school SEN provision, but the process lacks energy and direction.

87. With the exception of the 42% of statements of SEN not completed within 18 weeks, the LEA meets its statutory obligations with respect to pupils with SEN. Statements are reviewed regularly and re-drafted when needs or provision change significantly. The quality of statements is satisfactory. The LEA is appropriately represented at Annual Reviews for pupils in Years 2, 6 and 9 but secondary school staff in the schools visited did not attend the Annual Reviews of pupils in Year 6.

88. At the completion of each Annual Review the LEA makes a judgement as to whether the statement should be maintained, amended or ceased. Insufficient rigour is applied to this process, and only a very small number cease to be maintained.

89. Practice in schools is in line with the DfEE's Programme for Action and a Parent-Partnership Scheme has been successfully launched with Warrington LEA. The element of school budgets delegated under SEN headings is clear to all schools visited and schools could account for the way in which funds were spent. All governing bodies of schools visited reported to parents on SEN, although such reports lacked detail.

90. The quality of target setting by schools for individual pupils with SEN in annual reviews and individual education plans varies too widely. The best examples set clear and quantifiable targets. However, many targets are vague long term aspirations which defy effective evaluation at the end of the review period. The LEA is aware of the degree of variation in quality, but it has no comprehensive strategy in place to eradicate remaining weaknesses. This inability to measure pupil attainment and progress against levels of intervention means that the LEA is unable to say how far the money it spends centrally on services is contributing to school and pupil improvement.

91. The bi-annual meetings organised by the Learning Support Service and held in schools, involving the SEN co-ordinator and educational psychologist, provide a valuable forum for the flexible and sensible deployment of centrally funded staff. Services to schools visited which support SEN are very good, particularly in primary schools.

Recommendations:

In order to improve support for children with special educational needs:

- the strategic review should be concluded swiftly, and its findings implemented; (Paras 83 and 84)
- the implementation of the policy to promote inclusive education should be given a clearer focus and include plans for the future roles of special schools and units; (Paras 85 and 86)
- the target for completing statutory assessments within the recommended timescale should be increased and performance improved by better management, closer monitoring and more rigorous progress chasing of all contributors to the process. (Para 83)

SECTION FIVE

ACCESS

The Supply of School Places

92. The LEA dealt decisively with planning to eliminate the very significant level and complex pattern of school surplus places it inherited in April 1998. The radical approach was essential to secure the necessary momentum and to overcome resistance of individual governing bodies. The 1998/99 returns from the LEA show 20.8% surplus places in primary schools and 13.0% in the secondary sector. The greater concentration of surplus places is in Runcorn, with lower levels in Widnes. The LEA has needed to work in close partnership with the diocesan authorities, which have responsibility for a significant number of schools with surplus places.

Area	>10% surplus places but <25%	> 25% surplus places	Total with >10% surplus places
Runcorn	6 (1)	15 (3)	21(4)
Other areas	8 (4)	4 (1)	12 (5)
Total	12 (5)	19 (4)	33 (9)

(figures in brackets are voluntary aided schools. Source: LEA : Review of School Places)

93. The LEA issued a consultation paper on school organisation issues in July 1998. There was only a limited response or dissent from schools. The principles were subsequently incorporated into the School Organisation Plan, which the LEA published in accordance with the required timetable. In parallel, the LEA undertook a major consultation exercise in June and July 1999 on a range of options to tackle surplus places in both the primary and secondary sectors. Alternative proposals from governing bodies were then incorporated into the Director's recommendations to the Education Committee in September 1999.

94. The proposals covered options affecting the majority of schools and contributed to a significant degree of uncertainty and anxiety in schools. The process had the considerable merit, however, of consulting extensively and quickly. The agreed proposals involve school closures and amalgamations but principally are a mixture of "temporary" buildings removal, alternative use and adaptation which will lead to a reduction of surplus places to 9% in the primary sector and between 3.4% and 6% in the secondary sector (depending on post-16 issues) if they are implemented as planned. This will, in part, have to await the outcome of further detailed consultation and the necessary statutory procedures. The LEA has sought loan sanction through its annual capital bid to the DfEE and has set out detailed plans for the removal of surplus places to be completed by September 2002.

Admissions to school

95. The LEA's admissions procedures and criteria do not fully conform to the requirements of the Admissions Code of Practice and are not clear enough to parents. The removal of excess capacity in schools will test the present ambiguity. Since reorganisation Halton has eliminated catchment areas and introduced new arrangements for school admissions. It is not clear how the oversubscription criteria might be applied. Revised arrangements involve giving priority to "pupils living nearest the school defined as the crow flies...with account being taken of physical barriers or issues of the safety of movement by pupils". There is no definition of what might constitute physical barriers or factors which might impede safe movement. Halton has a network of expressways, busways and is divided by the River Mersey. It is unclear whether one, or all, fulfil the definition of a barrier or impede the safe movement of pupils and, if so, what route the crow subsequently might take.

96. As surplus places reduce there is the potential for parents to be penalised for the failure to secure their first choice school as a result of Halton's use of ranking preferences in allocating places coupled with the distance criterion used. This would be

unsatisfactory and inconsistent with the Code of Practice which requires admissions arrangements to be clear, objective and give every child the fair chance of a satisfactory school place. The admissions guide for parents is not well set out, does not distinguish clearly between community and voluntary aided schools and the different admission arrangements, nor offer consistent and clear information about over-subscription or age ranges. The booklet does not provide admissions criteria for voluntary aided schools.

Promoting Social Inclusion

97. One of the LEA's priorities in its EDP is to promote social inclusion. It has made a faltering and uncertain start to defining and tackling this issue. On disaggregation from Cheshire, Halton did not inherit any specialist school provision for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties, nor any pupil referral units. In the academic year 1998/9, 18 Halton pupils remained in what have become out-of-Borough day schools for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties. A further 30 pupils are placed in other out-of-Borough or independent residential schools. This is a substantial demand upon the LEA's resources.

98. The LEA's first Behaviour Support Plan, submitted to the DfEE in December 1998 was, as the LEA describes it, "a position statement of inherited services": it did not constitute a plan and was described as "poor". A revised plan has been drawn up and is a marked improvement: it is currently subject to a sound consultation process. It is clearly linked to other LEA and corporate plans such as the Children's Services Plan.

99. To improve on a position which is already much better than national or statistical neighbour averages, the plan has specific targets for 2002, which:

- reduce permanent exclusions to 15 per year (1998/9 – 23);
- reduce fixed term exclusions to 150 per year (1998/9 – 177);
- reduce unauthorised absence to 0.4% (primary) and 0.8% (secondary);
- increase the attainment of looked after children at GCSE to 75% gaining 1 x A* - G.

100. The strategy for further reducing exclusion and the reliance upon expensive, out-of-Borough placements includes the establishment, with other partners, of a primary phase Behaviour Support Team to act in a more preventative capacity. This is an imaginative and welcome initiative but reductions in placements will be incremental and long term. Information on the educational attainment of looked after children who attend Halton schools is not secure, although plans are in place to include these on the individual pupil database this academic year. The strategy for improving the attainment of looked after children is in its infancy.

101. The LEA, with the use of external funding and in association with a number of other partners, is involved with all the secondary schools in programmes which provide an alternative curriculum for disaffected pupils at Key Stage 4: these have been worthwhile and individual schools have successfully developed their own initiatives. There is scope for further development in these areas.

102. This LEA is not in receipt of the DfEE's Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant as the proportion of pupils from ethnic minorities, at 0.6% is well below the national average. Although it has an appropriate equal opportunities policy in place, it has not yet made a formal response to the recommendations of the Macpherson Report.

103. For the most part the LEA fulfils its child protection responsibilities. Nevertheless in 12 schools the designated teachers are not adequately trained.

104. However, beneath the surface of an overall favourable performance, there are stark inadequacies, particularly in relation to children who are looked after by the Council and placed in residential schools outside the authority.

105. The financial costs of the education of one pupil exceeded £74,000 in 1998/9: the total annual care and education costs being £128,000. The Education Directorate was only aware of his placement after the event and had no knowledge of the education he was receiving for that year, which was a mere 13 hours per week of 1:1 tuition for 35 weeks. Indeed, until it was highlighted by the inspection itself, the Education Directorate had continued to pay education costs of over £2000 per week (over £150 per hour) since September 1999, even though the pupil was beyond school leaving age and attending college. Once brought to the Directorate's attention, the payments were ceased immediately for this and another pupil, saving the Council £3,366 per week. Monitoring of these cases, including educational representation at statutory reviews, is very poor.

106. Services to support improvement in school attendance were sound in the majority of schools visited. The Education Welfare Service is well managed and appropriately targets the ten schools with less than 91% attendance.

Recommendations

In order to ensure that the council's intentions to remove surplus places are reinforced and achieved with expediency:

- all partners including governing bodies, school managers, diocesan bodies and alternative users should be made aware of the detail of proposed action and fulfil their respective responsibilities with the timetable for implementation. (Para 94)

In order to comply better with the Code of Practice on Admissions:

- the admissions criteria relating to distance and parental preferences should be reviewed, revised and set out unambiguously. (Para 95)

In order to fulfil its responsibility as a corporate parent to looked after children:

- statutory social services reviews and education special educational needs reviews for looked after children should be attended by relevant representatives of each department; (Para 105)
- the financial costs and educational value of out-of-Borough placements should be closely evaluated and monitored; (Para 105)
- proposals to establish a secure database to monitor the educational attainment of looked after children should be implemented and active steps should be taken, in line with DfEE guidance, to improve educational provision for looked after children. (Para 100)

APPENDIX

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS:

In order to improve further its strategic planning for school improvement:

- plans should be developed for the future role of the LEA as its schools become more able to support their own improvement, including the eventual brokering of its own monitoring and support role to its schools. (Para 26)

In order to focus resources more actively and effectively:

- the level of central funding retained for buildings insurance should be reviewed and the financing at the Council's own risk should be covered outside the revenue budget; (Para 17)
- budget decisions taken by the Council should be informed by a structured and comprehensive analysis of priorities, outcomes and judgements of effectiveness of previous spending decisions. (Para 27)

In order to improve LEA support for school improvement:

- the current working methods of the advisory service should be evaluated and, in consultation with schools, the service should identify:
 - criteria for schools that are able to operate more independently of LEA intervention and support; (Para 37)
 - consequent reductions in the type and levels of support required; (Para 37)
 - how good practice should be more effectively shared across schools. (Para 64)

In order to improve further the target-setting process:

- advice by link advisers on raising targets further in primary schools needs to be more consistent and probing, and based on current best practice; (Para 40)
- secondary schools should have more direct access to the quality and data manager, alongside link advisers in the target setting process; and (Para 41)
- in consultation with schools, a methodology to provide them with a more precise indicative target for GCSE performance needs to be identified; (Para 41)

In order to improve support for ICT:

- make more transparent the mechanism for delegating NGfL funding to school and how the LEA 'captures this back'; (Para 55)
- speed up its communication links development to support secondary schools. (Para 55)

In order to improve support to schools causing concern:

- the evidence and reasons for causes of concern should be more clearly explained and recorded; (Para 59)
- agreed targets and specific criteria and outcomes for removal from this category should be built into the school's action plan as early as possible. (Para 59)

In order to improve support for school management and governors:

- plans to support middle managers in undertaking observation of teaching and in developing schools' own monitoring procedures should be expedited; (Para 61)
- strategies should be identified to increase the take up of governor training, reduce the number of governor vacancies and publish criteria for appointing LEA governors. (Paras 66 and 68)

In order to improve financial planning and budget monitoring:

- schools should be involved in formal and timely consultation about the budget and its application to the council's priorities; (Para 72)
- members, and officers should be better informed about school budget deficits and surpluses. Budget deficit removal should be planned within an agreed timescale and governing bodies encouraged to use surpluses in a timely way to promote improvement in pupils' attainment. (Paras 73 and 78)

In order to improve support for children with special educational needs:

- the strategic review should be concluded swiftly, and its findings implemented; (Paras 83 and 84)
- the implementation of the policy to promote inclusive education should be given a clearer focus and include plans for the future roles of special schools and units; (Paras 85 and 86)
- the target for completing statutory assessments within the recommended timescale should be increased and performance improved by better management, closer monitoring and more rigorous progress chasing of all contributors to the process. (Para 83)

In order to ensure that the council's intentions to remove surplus places are reinforced and achieved with expediency:

- all partners including governing bodies, school managers, diocesan bodies and alternative users should be made aware of the detail of proposed action and fulfil their respective responsibilities with the timetable for implementation. (Para 94)

In order to comply better with the code of practice on admissions:

- the admissions criteria relating to distance and parental preferences should be reviewed, revised and set out unambiguously. (Para 95)

In order to fulfil its responsibility as a corporate parent to looked after children:

- statutory social services reviews and education special educational needs reviews for looked after children should be attended by relevant representatives of each department; (Para 105)
- the financial costs and educational value of out-of-Borough placements should be closely evaluated and monitored; (Para 105)
- proposals to establish a secure database to monitor the educational attainment of looked after children should be implemented and active steps should be taken, in line with DfEE guidance, to improve educational provision for looked after children. (Para 100)

© 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 and date thereof are stated.

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

Halton Borough Council
Education Offices
Education Directorate
Grosvenor House
Halton Lea
Runcorn
WA7 2WD