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IN EDUCATION**

**INSPECTION OF
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LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

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APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

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

2. The inspection was partly based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA, on school inspection information and audit reports, on documentation and discussions with LEA 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 60 schools. The response rate was 82 per cent.

3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to five secondary schools and 15 primary 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. Evidence was also drawn from recent visits to Thurrock schools by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) as part of national monitoring work.

COMMENTARY

4. Thurrock gained unitary status in April 1998. It has recently reorganised its political structure in response to the modernising government agenda. The borough covers approximately 67 square miles, bordering the Thames to the east of London. It has some significant pockets of deprivation, most notably in the Tilbury area. Relatively few adults have higher education qualifications and few come from social classes one and two. Overall, however, Thurrock's socio economic indicators are similar to national averages.

5. In contrast, although there have been some notable improvements, the performance of many of its schools compares unfavourably with national norms and some similar authorities (its 'statistical neighbours'). In general pupils' attainment is below average on entry to school, and for too many, remains below the national average throughout their education. Attendance rates are below average and fixed term exclusions are increasing. Many schools experience difficulties with recruitment and retention of good quality staff, and this problem contributes to the huge range in the quality and performance of Thurrock schools. Some are very good but OFSTED inspections have identified a relatively high proportion of weak schools.

6. Councillors care passionately about raising standards. For many the chance to overcome what they describe as a legacy of neglect by the previous LEA was the greatest driving force in seeking unitary status. The Council recognises that improving the quality of its schools and raising attainment are important to increase the life chances of Thurrock's young people. Accordingly, education has been given the highest priority, and its funding was protected at a time when other services have had to identify savings. However, Councillors have not translated their commitment to education into effective leadership and oversight of the work of the education service. They have failed to hold the department accountable and permitted it to evolve without a secure approach to performance management or an adequate approach to the use of management information.

7. The LEA has established a closer relationship with its schools and important early gains have been made in raising standards. However, standards of attainment are not improving as fast as they need to from their original low base in some schools, and progress in establishing coherent strategic leadership associated with effective monitoring and evaluation has been slow and patchy. Importantly, there are significant operational weaknesses in the leadership and implementation of the Education Development Plan (EDP) which have not been addressed with sufficient rigour by senior officers and which compromise the sustainability of progress on standards.

8. This inspection has identified a few areas where the LEA has been successful in supporting schools to improve. These are:

- support for numeracy;
- support for information and communication technology in the curriculum; and
- financial services.

9. In several other areas the support from the LEA has been satisfactory overall. These include:

- the collection and analysis of data;
- support for literacy;
- support for governors;
- management services such as personnel and property;
- support for pupils with special educational needs (SEN); and
- support for improving attendance.

10. There are, however, many functions which are critical to the performance of the LEA and which are performed unsatisfactorily. These include:

- corporate planning, strategic management and leadership;
- allocation of resources to priorities, including the Best Value process;
- monitoring, challenge and intervention;
- support for improving school management;
- support for early years education;
- strategic planning of SEN;
- admissions strategy;
- support to improve behaviour; and
- support for the reintegration of excluded pupils.

11. Overall, these weaknesses outweigh the strengths. This list of weaknesses presents the Council with a tough but unavoidable agenda for improvement. The Chief Education Officer's vision of cooperative and collegiate responsibility between the LEA and its schools ultimately has much to recommend it. For now, however, the need to challenge more of them to improve, and do so quickly, is more pressing. There is insufficient coherence across key aspects of the authority's approach to school improvement to ensure rapid, sustainable progress in important areas such as school management and raising expectations. The LEA is not consistently supporting some of the most vulnerable pupils through a coherent approach to social exclusion, and it has been slow to adopt measures to combat racism.

12. In the absence of more appropriate corporate management, effective leadership, and rigorous planning and review mechanisms, the senior team cannot deliver the immediate and necessary improvements. It is the view of the inspection team that the LEA in general, and the senior officer team in particular, lack the capability to make the necessary progress unassisted. They will need additional help and guidance from more experienced and effective personnel to address the weaknesses identified by this report. An early inspection of the LEA is advised to establish that sufficiently rapid action has been taken on the recommendations.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

13. Thurrock lies on the river Thames to the east of London covering an area of approximately 67 square miles. It became a unitary authority on 1 April 1998, taking over responsibility for education and social services from Essex County Council. The borough has a population of about 135,000, including 22,000 pupils on the roll of schools. The primary school population is approximately 13,300 and the secondary school population approximately 8,200. Numbers in schools are projected to continue to rise over the next 20 years.

14. About 60 per cent of the borough is designated as green belt. The traditional industries of manufacturing and services associated with the river are being replaced by lighter industries, including wholesale and retail distribution, transport and communication. Unemployment, at 4.5 per cent, is similar to the national average and on the Department of Environment, Transport and the Region (DETR) 1998 Index of Deprivation the borough was ranked 95th out of 310 authorities in England. The proportion of adults with higher education qualifications is similar to the statistical neighbour authorities but well below national averages. Similarly, the proportions of adults in social classes one and two are below national averages.

15. Schools are organised into two phases, primary and secondary, with some primary schools serving only the infant or junior age ranges. Post-sixteen education is provided in local colleges and no schools have sixth forms. The numbers and type of schools are given below:

47 primary schools including six voluntary schools and two foundation schools

10 secondary schools including one voluntary school and six foundation schools

three special schools; and

one pupil referral unit.

Thirty eight infant and primary schools provide early years education and 16 of these have nursery places for nearly 1,000 part-time pupils. A further 16 provide early infant admissions.

16. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is similar to the LEA's statistical neighbours and nationally, as is the proportion of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds. The proportion of pupils with statements of special educational needs (SEN) is below average in secondary schools and well below average in primary schools. Significantly, there is a high proportion of teaching posts filled on a temporary basis.

Performance

17. A detailed analysis of the performance of schools in Thurrock has been supplied to the LEA in the form of the OFSTED statistical profile, from which some of the following information has been extracted. Other information has been supplied directly by the LEA.

- Thurrock's baseline assessment data suggests that pupils' attainment on entry to primary schools is below average.
- In the 2000 tests at Key Stage 1, Thurrock's performance was well below the national figure for reading and writing and below in the mathematics tests. At Key Stage 2 the proportion of pupils achieving level 4 or above in tests is well below the national figures for English and mathematics, and below the national figure for Science. However, twenty-three primary schools recorded their best ever results in 2000. At Key Stage 3, the proportion of pupils achieving level 5 or above was in line with the national figures for mathematics but below average for science and well below the national figure in English. The percentage of pupils gaining five or more A*-C GCSE grades rose from 36 in 1999 to 40 in 2000.
- The Key Stage 2 and GCSE results indicate a clear improvement since 1998 and, overall, the EDP targets are being met. However, the improvements are from a low base and the gap between most of the Thurrock results and the national figures remains too great.
- OFSTED reports show that the quality of teaching in primary and secondary schools was below national figures in the first cycle of inspections. There has been some improvement in the quality of education, school climate and management in those primary schools inspected twice, although these aspects remain below both the national average and similar LEAs. The proportion of primary schools graded good or very good is well below that of Thurrock's statistical neighbours and the national average. The evidence from those secondary schools inspected twice suggests improvements have been made with regard to the quality of education and management, although again, they remain below the national average and that for similar authorities.
- Currently three of Thurrock's schools require special measures, a further two have been judged to have serious weaknesses, and one has been designated as underachieving. In addition, six schools, including two secondary schools, have been identified by the LEA as a cause for concern. One secondary school was awarded Beacon School status in Sept 1999.
- Attendance in primary and secondary schools is below the national average, but above that of similar LEAs. Unauthorised absence is above average in primary schools and in line with national figures in secondary schools. The proportion of boys permanently excluded from primary schools is above the national average and that of similar LEAs. The proportion of boys and girls permanently excluded from secondary schools is above the national average and that of similar LEAs. There has been a significant rise in the past twelve months in the numbers of pupils excluded for a fixed term in both primary and secondary schools.

Funding

18. Since reorganisation in 1998, Thurrock has increased its education budget so that it now matches the education standard spending assessment (SSA). Increases in the education SSA have been fully passed on to schools. This reflects the Council's prioritisation of spending on education and has taken place at the same time as substantial cuts in services elsewhere. Thurrock has taken up its full allocation of Standards Funds. School budget shares per pupil are high in line with the high SSA per pupil.

Standard Spending Assessment per pupil 2000/2001

£	Thurrock	Neighbours	Unitaries	England	Rank Order
Primary	2,579	2,401	2,424	2,535	4
Secondary	3,349	3,097	3,127	3,269	5

19. School budget shares (£2,749 per pupil) compare favourably with statistical neighbours (£2,645 per pupil average) and unitary authorities (£2,682 per pupil) but are below the national average (£2,814 per pupil). The local authority has made deliberate efforts to reduce differences between primary and secondary funding to well below the national average. Non-delegated budgeted expenditure overall is in line with statistical neighbours and unitary authorities and represents 16 per cent of the local schools budget (LSB). However, the consequence of overspending in the current financial year will push this up towards 17 per cent.

20. Control of expenditure on special educational needs (SEN) has been unsatisfactory. The overall SEN budget, including recoupment, is already comparatively high (17.7 per cent of LSB compared with unitary average of 16 per cent) and was overspent by £377K (9 per cent) in 1999/2000, mainly as a result of spending in supporting SEN statements. The overspending pattern has continued in the present year and is projected to be £450K above an increased budget. There is scope to offset the overspends within the overall education budget, but officers have not kept a detailed oversight of the trends and are only now considering how this major pressure may be accommodated in future budget arrangements. Weak budgetary control is increasing existing pressures on the overall education budget, and on the local authority's ability to secure school budgets.

21. Overall, school budget balances are too high. They represent, across all sectors, 11 per cent overall of the total individual schools budget shares (ISB) and are continuing to rise overall. The difficulty of recruiting additional teachers, for which schools may have made budget provision, is only a partial explanation. The local authority has begun to take steps to address the large balances, but it has not challenged all schools effectively enough to ensure that budget shares are appropriately spent to support the education of those children currently in school.

22. In support of its capital programme, Thurrock has successfully negotiated a substantial contribution of £5m, together with the site, from a developer to assist

financing a combined secondary and primary school to serve a major new housing area. There are no PFI schemes in place or under consideration.

Council structure

23. Thurrock Council comprises 49 members: 38 Labour, 10 Conservatives and one Independent. In its short existence, the Council structure has undergone very significant changes which have had major implications for the way it operates. The authority moved to a cabinet structure in May 2000. A cabinet of eight members and an overview and scrutiny committee with seven members was created. There is also a standards committee and scrutiny panels are set up on an *ad hoc* basis to look at particular issues. Within the cabinet one member has responsibility for Lifelong Learning, which includes the work of the education department.

24. A reorganised structure for officers has been approved, but is not yet completely staffed. The most significant change is at the second tier level where three executive director posts have been replaced by a deputy chief executive. The chief executive and his deputy are new to the posts but were in the previous structure.

25. These new structures are in their infancy, but it is already clear that some aspects of the corporate oversight of education are unsatisfactory. Members have set an appropriate overall objective for the education department in terms of raising attainment and they have safeguarded and increased funding for education to improve the resources available for the task. However, councillors have not engaged sufficiently with, or had effective oversight of, the detail of the education strategy. In particular, neither Councillors nor the Chief Executive have secured effective monitoring and evaluation of the work of the department.

26. The cabinet member for Lifelong Learning has a very broad brief and recognises that other councillors must be more involved in various working groups to consider properly the many significant priorities and issues involved in education. To this end, a report went to cabinet in November 2000 proposing the setting up of a forum which would be a free-standing meeting of partners and interest groups, including councillors. This, together with existing advisory groups, could resolve more of the issues about consultation, communication and participation that are already starting to emerge in the work of the authority in relation to education. Nevertheless, the arrangements for consideration of policy decisions against priorities, scrutiny of progress against the educational development plan (EDP), and monitoring of spending against priorities such as special educational needs (SEN) are weak.

27. Within the education department four senior officers work to the director of education and have responsibility for the advisory and Lifelong Learning service, pupil and student services, planning and resources, and the special needs service. This is a top heavy structure for a small LEA. Within these services the various functions are sensibly grouped but, because of the relatively large number of senior officers, the number of staff at lower levels is constrained and senior officers are heavily involved at an operational level. This limits their capacity to make an effective contribution to the strategic planning of the department.

The Education Development Plan

28. The EDP sets out a number of appropriate and important priorities for Thurrock, including raising attainment in literacy and numeracy. It incorporates a number of innovative activities which have potential to promote improvements in the long term. However, the EDP is seriously flawed in the extent to which it fails to address directly issues such as the quality of school management and leadership. There is also insufficient emphasis on raising teachers' expectations, despite this being recognised by officers and members as a major issue for the LEA.

29. The original EDP was approved by DfEE for three years subject to the specific condition that 'Activities within the school improvement programme are targeted more specifically in relation to need to enable the plan to be effectively delivered.' Progress in relation to the targets set out in the plan is variable, and monitoring of progress against the plan is weak.

30. The priorities in the EDP are given as:

1. Raising standards of literacy;
2. Raising standards of numeracy;
3. Partnership Performance Monitoring;
4. Improving schools causing concern;
5. Improving the quality of Early Years provision;
6. Supporting teaching and learning through ICT;
7. Raising achievement through the arts;
8. Special educational needs; and
9. Improving attendance.

31. Consultation on the EDP did not allow sufficient time, and was considered significantly poorer by schools in Thurrock than in other LEAs surveyed. The relevance of the priorities was judged slightly below average overall, although the clarity of strategy for school improvement in the EDP was judged above average. The original plan was revised in February 2000, incorporating new school targets for summer 2001 and some appropriate changes to the activities within the priorities. Nevertheless, consultation on the changes has been partial and the plan remains ambitious in the number of activities it describes.

32. The revised plan provides a superficial evaluation of progress against the year one activities but there is no evidence of a sufficiently robust analysis on all nine priorities. Progress against most of the priorities, as judged in this inspection, is described in detail elsewhere in this report but the picture is too variable for comfort. In relation to priorities 1, 2, 6, and 9 progress is satisfactory overall. Aspects of priorities 5 and 8 have weaknesses but the evidence in relation to music education under priority 7 is positive.

33. Significantly, there are major weaknesses in relation to aspects of priorities 3 and 4. Priority 3 is described as 'the cornerstone of the whole plan' but even in the revised plan it remains flawed in its intentions, coverage and outcomes. The partnership performance monitoring process set out in priority 3 describes the mechanism by which the LEA intends to work with schools to monitor performance and to affect changes. However, it has not fulfilled its early ambition of being a two way process between the schools and the LEA, and as a vehicle for monitoring and support for schools it lacks clarity and rigour. These weaknesses are examined in greater detail below in the section on monitoring, challenge, support and intervention.

34. An innovation within the EDP is the inclusion of a number of 'practitioner action research' projects involving LEA and school staff in the evaluation of approaches to school improvement. These are useful staff development activities which have the potential to promote aspects of good practice and to signal to schools and the wider education community that they are engaged in the learning process at several levels. The activities are self-monitoring but not all the success criteria are sufficiently related to their impact on standards and quality even in the longer term.

The allocation of resources to priorities

35. Although the Council has demonstrated a commitment to education since reorganisation by raising spending to SSA and facilitating real growth in the budget, the process of resource allocation is unsatisfactory. Too much of the growth in funding has been deployed on the basis of an insufficiently challenged assessment of need to address perceived areas of under-funding inherited from the previous authority. Although education was subject to a 'value for money' review by a member panel, it was exempted in 1999/2000 from the corporate budgeting scrutiny arrangements which needed to address savings elsewhere in the Council. It is now intended to include education in this process for the 2001/2002 budget round. However, at the time of the inspection, this process was not underway to any extent and the analysis was limited.

36. The process of identifying budget pressures and projecting the education budget is underdeveloped, and does not involve schools at an early enough stage either in the discussions about options within the education budget or in considerations about whole Council strategies. Partly because of the new cabinet structure, members have not been involved in the process at a sufficiently early stage.

37. Although school budget shares are comparatively high, the local authority appropriately has involved schools in consideration of needs led funding models. However, this has not progressed sufficiently quickly to enable the relative needs of the different sectors to be identified and shared with schools. This is an impediment when trying to prioritise pressures.

38. Schools have been routinely involved in consultations on Fair Funding arrangements, although the pace of communicating the outcome of deliberations has been slow. Thurrock is currently consulting on delegation for 2001/2002 in order to meet its delegation targets.

Best Value

39. The Council has incorporated within its Best Value Performance Plan a Best Value review for 'Children in School'. However, its scope does not take sufficient account of the capacity of the education service to respond with sufficient rigour and pace. The review was due to be complete in October 2000 but is now running significantly behind schedule. The process included a Challenge Conference, which was helpful in raising awareness of the role of the education service, but it has not enabled the review to progress significantly. The Council has acknowledged that there are weaknesses, and it is reviewing its methodology. It will consider the appropriateness and scope of the review, and next steps, in February 2001.

40. Planning and performance management in the education service are unsatisfactory. The overall service plan does not clearly establish lines of responsibility and accountability or serve to co-ordinate individual component plans. The absence of an explicit planning framework in turn impedes the operation of the employee development scheme, which does not have a strong and unambiguous appraisal element.

41. At the school level, the local authority has ensured that all schools have prepared statements about how they will apply Best Value principles, and there is some evidence that their appropriateness has been challenged by the local authority. School visits suggest, however, that the exercise itself has little impact on how resources are actually deployed.

42. The local authority's arrangements for selling services to schools are satisfactory overall, although the period of the contracts (three years) is unnecessarily long. The descriptions of its services, costs and purchasing arrangements are reasonably well set out in the service folder. However, when issued last year, this was not complete, in particular in relation to the advisory and inspection service. There is a relatively high take-up of local authority services and, although there is no undue pressure on schools to buy, there is no kitemarking of alternative providers to assist schools to consider Best Value options. Although there is not a widespread culture of seeking the views of schools on service quality through customer surveys, which has implications for the authority's approach to Best Value review, heads are appropriately represented on various groupings associated with individual services.

Recommendations

- Members of the Council and the chief executive should establish mechanisms for clearer oversight of the education department and its contribution to the corporate objectives through more rigorous monitoring, evaluation and performance management;
- The process of identifying budget pressures within the LEA should be improved and the involvement of schools as major stakeholders in consultations should be

secured. In particular, the local authority must ensure that the SEN budget is monitored more systematically;

- Schools should be challenged more effectively on the level of balances to ensure, wherever possible, that spending benefits children currently in the school;
- The EDP should be revised at an appropriate time to provide a clearer focus on improving the quality of management and leadership in schools, and on raising expectations;
- The scope and appropriateness of the 'Children in School' Best Value review should be reconsidered in the light of the LEA's capacity to implement it; and
- Schools should be assisted to secure Best Value through providing greater challenge on the application of the Best Value principles statements, kitemarking, and implementing more consistent surveys of school assessments of service performance and need.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Implications of other functions

43. Officers and members have made important progress in creating a climate of trust between the LEA and schools. However, the discharge of many of Thurrock's functions as an LEA and the quality of the school improvement services are too variable to support improvement of all schools in the LEA. There is satisfactory or better support available from most of the management services such as finance and administrative information and communication technology (ICT). However, too many of the functions and services which have the greatest potential for raising attainment have weaknesses. The weaknesses do not lie in the individual personal inputs into school, which are often valued. They relate to the strategic deployment and performance management of the services, and the planning, monitoring and evaluation of policies which should underscore the work of the LEA, but are often absent.

Monitoring, challenge, support, intervention

44. The support provided by advisers to individual schools is generally of good quality and mostly effective, particularly in relation to literacy, numeracy and ICT. However, the definition of support required, the rigour and quality of the monitoring, the degree and impact of challenge, and the clarity of criteria for intervention all have weaknesses. The deployment and performance management of advisers is unsatisfactory and the LEA is not in a position to evaluate the value for money provided by its advisers. Overall, this crucial aspect of the work of the LEA is unsatisfactory.

45. The Partnership Performance Monitoring (PPM) scheme is at the centre of the LEA's approach to monitoring, challenge support and intervention, and it largely dictates the level of link adviser support available to the school. The process is set out in the EDP, but few of its aspirations have been met in full. Almost all of the schools visited during the inspection were confused about the level of entitlement under the scheme. Details of schools' entitlement to advisory input were not included in the Services to School folder, there is no service plan covering the work of the advisers, and there is insufficient distinction overall between the statutory functions of the advisory service and the other work of advisers that schools can purchase separately.

46. In practice, most schools were happy with the actual amount of support they receive. That is partly because they perceive it to be more than under the previous LEA, and in many respects it appears to have no limit because advisers are prepared to work very long hours to accommodate most requests. This raises significant questions about the workload on advisers and the extent to which the support is being targeted strategically to bring about the most needed improvements. There is also little consideration of value for money, or indeed, whether all schools ought to get out of the system what they contribute.

47. One of the key components of visits by advisers is in relation to promoting school self evaluation. Most of the schools felt that adviser visits did encourage this to some extent and there was evidence that some schools, particularly primary schools, have increased self confidence in this process, for example through joint visits to lessons with advisers. However, the extent to which this forms part of a coherent strategy to promote greater autonomy in schools and to enable advisers to target their visits more directly to the areas of greatest need is neither well articulated nor fully understood by schools.

48. Monitoring of schools takes place during termly visits by advisers. These visits are structured, but do not lead to consistently high quality data which are then evaluated against agreed criteria to identify schools at risk. An 'alerts' system based on Key Stage 2 data has very recently been developed, but this had not been shared with schools at the time of the inspection, and it does not make use of any data which are gathered during the visits to schools. Data from different sources in the education department are poorly co-ordinated at present, except for those schools already identified in a category of concern. The lack of common computerised systems, including one for individual pupil level data, also limits the overall usefulness of the data available for alerting the LEA to possible problems in schools.

49. The number of visits to schools by advisers averages out to 14 days per school across the LEA. The range is quite considerable, but inspection visits suggest that there is insufficient differentiation in the frequency and purpose of advisory visits to schools. Monitoring visits normally result in a written report but these vary in incisiveness and too frequently do not comment clearly about, or challenge the quality of, management and leadership in the school. It is intended that the reports should be made available to chairs of governors. However, the mechanisms to ensure that this occurs are insecure, and the extent to which governors are encouraged to use the evaluations is very limited.

50. Advisers are increasingly challenging schools to raise attainment, mainly through the target setting process. However, in the school survey, support for target setting was judged significantly below that in other LEAs surveyed and the LEA's ability to challenge schools to perform better was considered below average overall. During the inspection visits there was evidence of appropriate challenge in a minority of schools, but in too many it was clear that the data held by advisers were not as detailed as that held by schools and so advisers could not properly challenge the targets set by schools.

51. Intervention has been appropriately defined by the LEA, although confusingly, a recent newsletter seems to redefine intervention as 'support'. The criteria for intervention have been set out, but in the main they are not sufficiently explicitly quantified and it is not clear how many aspects of the work of a school would have to be weak in order to trigger intervention. Schools do not have a clear enough understanding of these processes.

Collection and analysis of data

52. The collection and collation of essential performance data got off to a slow start, but over the last year a number of improvements have been made. Consequently,

this area is now satisfactory. National and local data are satisfactorily brought together at a whole school level. The planned introduction of a system capable of generating individual pupil level information is scheduled for implementation early in the new year.

53. The recent additional appointment to the Research and Statistics section has increased the authority's capacity to collect and analyse data, and facilitated a more strategic and co-ordinated approach to data collection across the LEA. However, the authority does not systematically collect and share data on the attainment of key groups such as Travellers, children in public care and pupils from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. An effort has been made to collate paper based information on the attainment of groups of pupils with particular needs to address this serious gap in information. There is recognition that further contextual information, such as attainment on entry or pupil mobility, is needed both by the LEA, and individual schools, to enable secure judgements to be made about attainment and appropriate levels of support.

54. The vast majority of schools surveyed judged the information provided to them by the LEA as at least satisfactory. The benchmarking data available in the individual Key Stage profiles distributed to each school enables a school to compare its results to other similar schools. In the primary sector the agreement that the profiles should attribute data to schools facilitates collaboration on raising standards. There is slightly less satisfaction from schools about the guidance provided by the LEA on the use of data, and inspection visits highlighted some weaknesses in the use of data, particularly in primary schools.

Support for literacy

55. While support for literacy has not always been satisfactory, particularly in the secondary sector, there is evidence that it has improved and is now satisfactory overall. The additional time made available to the National Literacy Strategy manager/English adviser, by reducing her link adviser workload and increasing the level of consultancy support, is supporting this improvement. The data now being collected and analysed are supporting a much more finely tuned approach to meeting primary schools' needs. In addition, there is a more rigorous and co-ordinated approach to planning and management. Link adviser monitoring has been given a tighter structure and a number of activities are underway to support effective cross phase working.

56. The authority's EDP recognises that standards of attainment in English are too low. During the years 1995 to 1998 overall standards at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 remained below the average both nationally and against statistical neighbours at most levels. Evidence from OFSTED school inspection reports suggests that the picture was equally bleak in terms of progress at Key Stages 1, 2 and 4 with considerably more schools being identified as poor than nationally or against statistical neighbours. By 1999 there was evidence that some progress was being made although, even then, only 18 primary schools met their targets. In 2000, with 65 per cent of pupils reaching level 4 at Key Stage 2, the authority is only one percentage point from this year's target. Nevertheless, standards remain low in comparison with the national average.

57. The majority of primary, secondary and special schools surveyed regard support for literacy as at least satisfactory, with 63 per cent of primary schools judging it to be good or very good. The enthusiasm and hard work of the strategy manager and consultant have had a positive effect on the raising of standards and the support provided, particularly to the schools identified for intensive support, has been effective.

58. Good progress has been made to remedy the concerns expressed by HMI on literacy monitoring visits earlier in the year. The implementation of the additional literacy support has been reviewed and schools are now clearer about it. The evaluation of the impact of training and consultancy is being tackled on a more systematic and long term basis, and there is evidence of beneficial links with a range of internal and external partners. These include: staff working with pupils who do not have English as their home language, the School Library Service and non-maintained early years providers. Further work still needs to be done to support effective school self evaluation, particularly at co-ordinator level, and to ensure all schools are challenged appropriately. More remains to be done to identify and promote the dissemination of good practice systematically and address more directly the promotion of literacy across the curriculum, especially in secondary schools.

Support for numeracy

59. The support provided for numeracy is satisfactory overall and in a number of respects it is good. While there is no written overall LEA strategy for numeracy, beyond the statement of intent within the EDP, planning for the implementation of the strategy is sound and procedures for link adviser monitoring have been reviewed and appropriately tightened up this year.

60. Standards of attainment in mathematics over the four years from 1995 to 1999 demonstrated a generally depressed picture, except at Key Stage 3. At both Key Stages 1 and 2 the results obtained were below the average results nationally and those of statistical neighbours. Recent OFSTED school inspection reports show that progress in primary schools from this low base is in line with that nationally and with statistical neighbours at both key stages, although at Key Stages 3 and 4 a considerably higher percentage of secondary schools are making poor progress.

61. The careful targeting of support through the National Numeracy Strategy (NNS) is having an obvious impact on standards. The LEA has made excellent progress towards achieving its 2002 Key Stage 2 target of 72 per cent of Year 6 pupils achieving level 4 in the national tests. Results have risen from 48 per cent in 1998 to 61 per cent in 1999 and 64 per cent in 2000, which is above the target of 61 per cent.

62. Expectations have been challenged, and good practice is being disseminated through a variety of mechanisms. Observations of Leading Maths Teachers and access to NNS Updates for all schools have been especially valued. Key staff within the education department, including those supporting pupils with special needs or from other ethnic backgrounds, have been involved in numeracy training. Close links have been established with a number of wider partners including adult

education and the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership. Some innovative activities, including mathematics trails and mathematical activities in a local shopping centre, are supporting community involvement in mathematics and raising the profile of numeracy with parents.

63. Although the level of satisfaction expressed in the school survey for the support provided by the LEA for numeracy is not as good as that registered in many other authorities surveyed, all primary schools and the majority of other schools expressed at least satisfaction with the support. Most schools visited were confident about their ability to move forward and were generally very positive about the enthusiasm, professionalism and hard work of the current numeracy team. The quality of most courses, in-school training and consultancy is good. Successful summer schools and the use of bridging units across Key Stages 2 and 3 have had a positive impact. Numeracy co-ordinators and heads of mathematics value their regular meetings and the helpful co-ordinators' handbook is facilitating consistency and coherence in practice. Some schools have had to work with three different NNS consultants but the disruption caused has been recognised and efforts made to ameliorate it by continuing to support the Year 1 intensive schools for a further year.

Support for ICT in the curriculum

64. Support for ICT in the curriculum is at least satisfactory and in some aspects good. The LEA has a clear strategy for developing ICT in schools, both in terms of ICT capability and as a tool to support learning across the curriculum. This is reflected clearly in the EDP and in the ICT strategic plan. Appropriate links have been made between advisory and technical support and an ICT steering group enables representative headteachers from across the phases to meet with key officers in the LEA.

65. Schools surveyed judged support for ICT more positively than any other LEA and this result was supported by the school visits. Schools are able to link support from the ICT adviser and other advisory staff directly to school improvement. There is effective support for development planning and auditing, for teaching and support staff development, for curriculum development and for the dissemination of good practice. Schools speak highly of the range and quality of courses on offer and of the in-school one to one consultancy available, both of which have a clear focus on classroom practice. Coordinators generally feel supported in their role; they value the regular and well planned coordinators' meetings, the handbook for co-ordinators and the rapid response to their queries. The New Opportunities Fund training undertaken to date is helpful in most schools.

66. The majority of schools have taken advantage of the LEA's ability to negotiate with private companies on their behalf. However, in the case of National Grid for Learning, support from the LEA has not always been as readily available as schools would wish when there have been implementation difficulties involving external contractors that have got in the way of learning. The phased programme of development that will see all schools trained, connected to, and using, the internet and intranet by 2002 is on track. A number of partnerships have been forged with local companies and with the adult education service to support schools in obtaining

equipment as well as in making links with parents and the wider community. The LEA currently has a bid underway to set up ICT learning centres in partnership with the library service.

Support for schools causing concern

67. The support for schools causing concern has some strengths, but overall it is unsatisfactory because of the lack of a sufficiently coherent process to identify and ensure sufficient progress in poorly performing schools, including those identified by the LEA as having weaknesses. In its early days the LEA was very stretched to provide the support needed in relation to those schools identified as requiring special measures. Co-ordination of the support was weak. Over time, the support for these schools has improved. Two primary schools which were subject to special measures made sufficient progress in two years or less and no longer require special measures, and three primary schools which were defined as having serious weaknesses, have been removed from this category.

68. For each school causing concern, operational response is co-ordinated by a lead officer working with a link adviser and a separate adviser whose role is to monitor action and progress. There is a programme of monitoring visits and feedback is provided through the link adviser to the school. The lead officer co-ordinates a programme of multi-agency meetings which, appropriately, draw together a range of data about the school, check on progress and contribute suitable resources.

69. This process has had some success in the primary sector but less so in the secondary sector, where two schools have been identified as needing special measures in the last calendar year. One of these schools was receiving support from the LEA as a school with serious weaknesses. Evidence from visits during the inspection supports this picture. More worryingly, it suggests very strongly that the LEA has not secured effective mechanisms to identify all of its weakest schools or to provide sufficient support of consistent quality to ensure that those schools it has identified make sufficiently rapid progress. Governors are not always involved sufficiently in the exchange of information about their school when weaknesses are identified.

70. The multi-agency meetings described above work best where there is a clear view about what action is needed, but in some cases there is insufficient rigour in specifying a course of action with suitable, measurable targets. This considerably weakens the possibility of appropriate progress in every case. In addition, there is no forum where the actions in relation to all such schools are routinely discussed and the overarching strategies evaluated. As a consequence, the LEA is not well placed to learn from its experiences and to improve on them in the future. Significantly, of the six schools identified by the LEA as a cause for concern since April 1999, five have now been in this category for over twelve months, despite the target set in the EDP of removing such schools within twelve months.

Support for governors

71. The small central team which provides support to governors is very stretched but provides a satisfactory range of services of suitable quality. Nevertheless, there are weaknesses in relation to informing governors of any concerns held by the LEA about their schools. All but two schools subscribe to the scheme for the training of governors and the training is suitable and effective. It is possible for governors to obtain BTeC accreditation if they wish through the training, and the LEA is hoping to introduce a similar qualification for chairs and vice chairs. A useful database is maintained to record which governors have been on which training courses, although the computerised system is not running yet.

72. The LEA makes reasonable efforts to ensure that vacancies for LEA nominated governors are filled as quickly as possible, and the number of long term vacancies is within reasonable limits.

73. There are termly meetings with the director of education and heads of division which are open to all governors, and the Thurrock Association of Governors (TAG) provides a useful forum for communicating concerns at other times. A recent innovation is a newsletter for governors and a range of other initiatives such as establishing self evaluation and a mentoring scheme for governors is under consideration. A clerking service is available on subscription, but the LEA is limited in its capacity to extend this because of shortage of personnel.

Support for school management

74. While some aspects of support for management are satisfactory, and in some cases good, the lack of a strategy that ensures co-ordination of support across the LEA makes this area unsatisfactory overall. There is a variety of support available to senior and middle management. However, this has not always been carefully targeted to need, obviously linked to the EDP, planned in a coherent and consistent way, or been responsive enough to changing priorities.

75. Management and curriculum development has been planned primarily around courses and conferences organised and delivered mainly by LEA advisers and officers. This programme has been limited in its scope and difficult to staff, because of the constraints operating in a small authority. The LEA is tackling this by involving staff in schools more widely and by appointing associate consultants. Nevertheless, information on courses offered, whether within or outside of the formal course programme, has sometimes arrived too late to be integrated easily into headteachers' planning. It has also often not recognized the realities of managing a school and has provided too little detail for heads to be secure in the knowledge that their school's needs would be met. There is also some confusion about what support the LEA is providing centrally and what is available to those schools buying into the service.

76. In the school survey, support to senior managers was judged to be at least satisfactory by most respondents, although secondary heads were less satisfied than

in other LEAs. Many heads attributed their positive response to LEA support for management to the help available through the link adviser, most of whom are regarded highly. In primary schools joint lesson observations with advisers have provided support for self evaluation, although secondary heads feel that this is an area where little support has been provided.

77. The authority supports heads and deputies to take advantage of the national leadership programmes and new heads have access to an induction course as well as to an experienced head mentor. While the induction course last year was well received by most new heads in terms of content and networking opportunities, there has been no mentor training or support to maximise its effectiveness. Little support beyond the national programme has been available to deputies although, at their request, a conference for deputies has been organised this year. Support for middle managers has mainly been curriculum rather than management focused and often within the context of national programmes such as literacy and numeracy. Where there is a regular programme of meetings organised by advisers, for example for assessment co-ordinators, these are generally found to be relevant and helpful.

78. The programme of support for newly qualified teachers (NQTs), jointly designed by the authority and headteachers, is well structured and comprehensive and well regarded by most heads and NQTs. The authority has organised a financial package of support for NQTs as well as other staff, which it jointly funds with schools, to attract them into the area. This, alongside the funding accessed through the Teacher Training Agency to provide taster opportunities and placements for graduates and returning teachers, is aimed at tackling the major recruitment and retention difficulties faced by schools. Not all schools, however, feel that the LEA is supporting them adequately in terms of recruitment and retention.

Early years

79. The picture on support for early years education is very mixed, and in terms of a clear and shared focus on the raising of attainment is unsatisfactory overall. More schools rate support for improvement in early years provision as less satisfactory in Thurrock than in other LEAs. While the LEA's analysis of course evaluations indicates a general satisfaction with INSET, a number of schools were critical of pre-course information and the timing and quality of support for the Foundation Stage

80. The work of the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP) is good in many areas, particularly in the bringing together of a range of providers within the non-maintained sector to work collaboratively and to engage in conferences and training. There is evidence that this work is making a difference in the quality of provision in this sector. However, the support provided to schools is very patchy and there is clear evidence that the Partnership has not been successful in bringing all schools on board in order to ensure a coherent focus on raising attainment in early years provision. This is particularly important given the recognition by senior officers of the need to raise overall standards at KS1.

81. The LEA has limited information available on the level of attainment of children on entry into early years education, and the baseline assessment scheme adopted does not enable comparisons to be made with the national picture of attainment on

entry into statutory education. Evidence available from more recent OFSTED school inspection reports indicates that the profile of pupils on entry has improved since the early inspections of the same schools and is now very similar to the authority's statistical neighbours. Inspections have shown that, while some schools are providing a good quality of education for early years pupils, more schools than in the authority's statistical neighbours or nationally require much improvement.

82. The authority has rightly prioritised improving the quality of early years provision in its EDP and this is echoed in a sound Early Years Development and Childcare Plan. Both plans appropriately place a heavy emphasis on the importance of providing access for all children to good quality early years provision, and of making strong links with parents. However, there is insufficient focus on establishing systematic and secure processes for assessing the impact of this work on children's attainment. Social Services involvement has not always been as consistent as is necessary, but has improved recently.

Recommendations

- The strategy for the monitoring and support of schools should be more clearly set out, clarifying schools' entitlement and distinguishing between those activities funded centrally and those schools are able to purchase;
- The triggers for identification of schools causing concern, and for intervention, should to be clarified and communicated more effectively to schools;
- Advisers should provide unequivocal views about the quality of leadership and management in their schools and these should be communicated more effectively to governors;
- The strategies used for supporting schools identified as causing concern should be evaluated to establish best practice and improve future interventions;
- The process of bringing together the separate data on schools held in different parts of the department should be speeded up to inform priorities for action;
- The strategy and timescale for integrating the administrative and curriculum ICT networks should be set out and communicated to schools;
- The strategies for supporting and improving the effectiveness of senior and middle management should be improved, particularly in those schools where these are obvious weaknesses in management and leadership;
- An approach should be agreed with schools for assessing progress of pupils from entry to Key Stage 1, and for improving the effectiveness of support available for the development of early years education; and

- More effective liaison should be developed with the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership to ensure a coherent focus on the raising of attainment in early years provision.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate planning

83. Overall, the quality of corporate planning and management in relation to education is unsatisfactory. There is too little coherence between the Corporate Plan and those plans relating to education, and the procedures for implementing and monitoring the plans are insecure. Whilst elected Members initially provided a clear agenda for education, they are not providing an effective strategic direction for the education department within a coherent policy framework.

84. The Thurrock Corporate Plan 2000-01 is a draft plan, which covers one year only. It sets out some clear aims and values, and it establishes suitable policy priorities, which include two directly impacting on the work of the education department. It recognises the priorities established in the Education Development Plan but does not draw on all significant plans relating to education to establish a coherent framework of policy and planning. Significantly, it recognises the need to raise expectations, which is a weakness in the detail of the EDP, but it does too little to secure effective integrated delivery of services within the council.

85. A report by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) in October 1999, which was commissioned by the Council, provided some useful guidance on the corporate planning process but a number of the reservations identified in the report still remain. That report suggested that the Council relied too much on officers for direction, it advised production of a three year corporate plan and pointed out that the Chief Executive and top team need to consider the exact leadership contribution they should be making. All of these comments remain valid, pointing to weaknesses in the corporate management.

86. One of the Council's main considerations in planning its new officer structure was that 'stronger control should be exerted in directing strategy, co-ordinating policy and monitoring performance'. There is little evidence that these are being improved. There is a lack of strategic direction being set for the education department by members and a lack of sufficiently effective monitoring and evaluation of the work of the department by members and the most senior officers. No rigorous procedures are in place, for example, to evaluate the education department's contribution to corporate priorities.

87. It is clear and understandable that the recent restructuring and modernisation has occupied a good deal of members' attention. However, there remain insufficient and ineffective reporting, scrutiny and challenge of the work of the education department to provide a clearer policy steer in keeping with its stated aims of raising attainment.

88. Within the loose policy framework provided by members, the director of education has set out a vision of corporate responsibility with schools and the need to develop a collaborative 'learning society'. These are worthy goals, which are having a positive influence on the approach to development in some schools. However, there is insufficiently effective leadership in bringing coherence to the work

of all sections of the education department in relation to the school improvement agenda. The lack within the education department of a common school database containing files from all sections of the department is a simple manifestation of this. Moreover, some of the work of the department has lacked proper oversight and accountability, with little rigorous evaluation of impact. The lack of strategic oversight of the partnership performance monitoring process is an example of this. Performance management is underdeveloped at all levels within the education department.

89. More broadly, senior officers and members have not put in place sufficiently robust mechanisms to enable them to form a detailed assessment of value for money of the various support services, such as advisers, against the priorities set for education.

Management services

90. The Council management support services are at least satisfactory overall and, in some instances, good. In general, the management services described below provide satisfactory value for money. During the period after reorganisation, Thurrock's capacity to provide effective management support services was significantly tested. It had made a deliberate decision to seek to supply management support service needs in-house, building upon the former District Council's limited infrastructure. In a number of instances, there was an inadequate understanding of schools' needs and of the processes required.

91. Finance support is good. The service is highly rated by schools overall. School visits in the main confirmed this. The buyback package, which is taken up by most schools, enables them to take advantage of a finite level of support in the form of on-site support, a help-line, or course attendance according to needs. Arrangements for the monitoring of budgets is sound and deficits are rare.

92. Personnel support is sound although many schools have commented upon its incapacity, on occasions, to respond as effectively as they might hope. It suffered from understaffing at the time of reorganisation but is now working at full complement. Staff are well-qualified and the service is rare in Thurrock in having undertaken a customer satisfaction survey. A major challenge for this service is the difficulty of recruiting and retaining teaching staff within the LEA. The LEA has received funding to employ a recruitment and retention manager. It is involved in a project with 22 outer London boroughs to benchmark activity and has established that there is around a 12 per cent turnover rate of teaching staff in Thurrock, covering all age groups. Strategies for recruitment have involved targeting returners, men into teaching and work with colleges. The LEA subsidises an early start scheme for new teachers which involves paying staff from July, a rent allowance and the relocation package.

93. The payroll service is satisfactory but will need to continue to work hard to build and maintain its reputation. Transfer to Thurrock payroll for school staff did not go well at reorganisation. Errors were frequent and the absence of a customer focus concerned schools. However, the authority has addressed both the style and

performance of the service. It monitors errors closely where they occur and has reduced these to an acceptable level.

94. ICT administrative support provided from management services is satisfactory in most respects. Local government reorganisation gave the local authority the opportunity to secure a basic level of administrative hardware and software in all its schools, although the curriculum and administrative networks are not integrated. Electronic mail communications with schools are underdeveloped and the local authority has not developed explicit protocols for managing information flow to schools in reducing bureaucracy. Central administrative systems inherited from the previous authority were limited. Thurrock has made significant strides in introducing a management information system, which will have four modules operating by the end of the present year. These will include the core pupil database, SEN, governors and admissions, with the capacity to draw from and return information to school systems. The system has the capacity to accommodate four further modules (exclusions, early years, school benefits, and educational psychologist service) in the next financial year. The local authority is well advanced in preparing for piloting the new pupil level annual schools census (PLASC) in all of its schools in 2001.

95. Property support services are satisfactory and are co-ordinated through the property services department of the Council. Work is undertaken by external contractors on the basis of a schedule of rates agreed with the council. Most primary schools use the service. The Council took the decision before reorganisation to exercise more control over ensuring the effectiveness of the commissioning and monitoring of work required by schools. Work undertaken by the property services department, as well as other property issues, is monitored by a Best Value and property working group which includes headteachers. Minutes are regularly issued to schools. Schools can either return their budgets for management to the authority or use the service solely to place orders, with commission charged on each order. Appropriate systems are in place to monitor work commissioned through the council.

96. Grounds maintenance provided by Thurrock has been poor. Satisfaction rates are low and many schools have sought alternative providers. The service is now regrouping and schools have been compensated for poor service in the past.

97. The school meals service which operates in all but two of the primary schools is efficient, well focused and enjoys high satisfaction rates from schools. Costs are relatively low and strategy is well informed by good management information. A consultancy service is offered for secondary schools.

98. The authority performs the client role appropriately on behalf of a small number of schools seeking a school cleaning service, which is provided by another authority following tender, and also will give advice to schools seeking to make their own provision.

Recommendations

- The coherence between corporate plans and those within the education department should be improved to facilitate a closer alignment of education priorities with the aims of the Council;

- A more rigorous approach to service planning and performance management should be introduced within the education department;
- Members and the Chief Executive should provide a more effective strategic steer for the education department and the director should provide stronger leadership in coordinating the work of the department to improve schools; and
- Greater efforts should be made to work with schools to assist with the recruitment and retention of teachers.

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION

Strategy

99. The LEA's aim to promote inclusion in Thurrock schools has been successful in increasing opportunities, particularly in primary schools, for pupils with special educational needs to be educated with their peers. During its first two years every attempt has been made by the LEA to improve consultative processes, levels of service provision, the quality and type of central support available and training and development programmes. The LEA has been responsive to schools' and parents' concerns as well as to their ideas for improvement. The principles of 'Empowerment, Partnership and Inclusion' are held strongly to be at the centre of the LEA's and schools' work.

100. Notwithstanding this, strategic planning of SEN is weak and imprecise. The LEA lacks a clearly articulated strategy, based on a comprehensive map of practice, provision and aspirations, in which the planned consequences of an inclusion strategy have been weighed alongside the interests of schools, governors, members and parents. The links between the priorities for school improvement and those for special needs within the EDP are tenuous. There is no coherent planning mechanism or structure for ensuring the raising of standards for pupils with SEN either in mainstream or in special settings. Practice has evolved in the main through negotiation rather than by review. The LEA did acknowledge in the preface to the draft SEN policy (December 1999) that the document was a process towards a review of and redefinition of SEN provision. This stage has yet to be achieved.

Statutory obligations

101. The LEA takes reasonable steps to meet its statutory obligations. It has worked hard to improve the completion rate of statements of SEN within the 18 week timescale from 49 per cent in 1998/9 to 79 per cent in 2000. This was achieved despite continuing staff shortages and an administrative reorganisation. There has also been a significant improvement in the quality of written statements and a tightening of the procedures for managing reviews.

102. Parent partnerships have been a success in Thurrock, largely as a result of the LEA's willingness to listen and to act more promptly on matters of immediate concern. The work and the care plans prepared by the multi-agency pre-school assessment team involving education, health and social services are exemplars of good practice in the support to pupils with disabilities.

Improvement and value for money

103. Direct support for pupils with SEN is good. Most services provided by the LEA are well regarded, with the exception of the educational psychology service, which has suffered from local difficulties in recruiting and retaining specialist staff.

104. Special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) are well supported through innovative area cluster arrangements. These are effectively managed by the

borough SENCO and the team of cluster SENCOs. Special schools are also included in these arrangements. The team has adopted the LEA's key principles and based their activities of advice, training and quality assurance upon these. There is a strong research-based approach to practice which is having a positive impact in raising the credibility and profile not only of school SENCOs but also the learning support assistants in the majority of schools. Training and development opportunities have increased considerably and a growing number of SENCOs and support teachers from all sectors have successfully completed the post-graduate certificate in inclusive education.

105. Cluster SENCOs and their school counterparts are now used effectively by headteachers as part of their school improvement strategies. School-led planning meetings involving those services concerned with SEN, behaviour support and access, have been welcomed. Schools appreciate the opportunity to identify their support needs in advance and target support more effectively. However, equivalent liaison with the advisory service is underdeveloped.

106. Recent changes in the management and leadership of the educational psychology service (EPS) have begun to improve a service which was poorly regarded by schools. The time taken to write advice for draft statements is now monitored effectively and written reports outline the outcomes of school visits; thus addressing the most serious concern to schools. The means of allocating EPS time to schools has been subject to review with the result that direct service delivery time will be increased in 2001. There are, however, still weaknesses which undermine efforts to provide a service of sufficient quality. As SENCOs become more skilled under the LEA's approach, there is pressure on the EPS to provide a more specialist service. This is difficult for them to do given staff shortages, although the LEA has endeavoured to recruit and retain more staff

107. A small minority of schools question the cost effectiveness of the cluster SENCO arrangements and would prefer for the funding to be delegated to schools. At their best, cluster SENCOs act as effective brokers and consultants on learning support. They disseminate good practice. Their formal activities include the robust monitoring of the quality of provision for SEN through statements. The function assists the LEA to fulfil its statutory duty in this respect and ensures a satisfactory degree of consistency in the way Thurrock schools apply the criteria for additional support.

108. There are inadequate procedures to ascertain the cost effectiveness of support for SEN. The absence of a detailed SEN strategy with clear arrangements for monitoring and evaluation of special educational needs provision prevents the LEA from being able to demonstrate value for money in this area.

Recommendation

- The strategic planning for SEN should be improved. In particular, there should be wide consultation on a comprehensive and fully costed policy to increase the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools and to clarify the implications of this in the School Organisation Plan.

SECTION 5: ACCESS

The supply of school places

109. The School Organisation Plan (SOP) is satisfactory, but detailed information and analysis on SEN are limited. There is, overall, a satisfactory match of school places to numbers of students in the borough. On the whole, Thurrock faces the challenge of planning for expansion; pupil numbers are rising as a result of major housing developments, although the factor used to calculate the pupil numbers is crude and untested. Where there are identified surplus primary places in the east of Thurrock, the SOP establishes the need for action. Initial consultation has taken place with schools who are now, understandably, impatient for the authority's decision on the next steps.

110. Thurrock's approach to making additional secondary place provision has not been sufficiently linked to addressing standards of achievement. Thurrock believes that circumstances relating to the delayed development of additional provision by the previous authority restricted its scope to pursue more robust options. However, it has done well to secure the funding to create a new 11 to 16 secondary school, although this alone will not resolve the complexity of secondary transfer and overall demand for secondary places.

Asset Management

111. The overall condition of school buildings in Thurrock is good. The local authority undertakes its landlord responsibilities through twice termly visits to schools by an assigned surveyor. However, evidence from school visits is that the intention that schools should receive notes of visits identifying issues for further action has not been fully implemented.

112. Thurrock has made a satisfactory start in assessing the condition of school buildings in the borough and in quantifying and prioritising the backlog of repairs required to be undertaken during a five-year period at a cost of £14.5 million. It received a substantial boost of £1.8m from New Deal for Schools (NDS 4) funding in 2000 which has eliminated all category 1 and most category 2 condition items. In drawing up its asset management plan, the Council commissioned consultants to undertake building surveys for schools and these are now complete. It has now begun the assessment of suitability process. However, its communication to schools about the process was uneven and inaccuracies and complexities arising from the condition surveys will prove an impediment to securing the commitment of schools to meet their obligations.

Admissions

113. Arrangements for admissions in Thurrock are unsatisfactory overall, although there are a number of strengths and examples of good practice. Thurrock has separate admissions booklets for the primary and secondary phases. They have been improved for the 2001/2002 admission year. Both booklets carry limited

references set out in minority languages, full details exist of the admissions criteria for secondary community, foundation and voluntary schools and they meet with the requirements of the Code of Practice. However, the primary admissions booklet does not set out the different phasing of admissions arrangements for all community primary schools, which have been delegated to governing bodies. It is also misleading about parental entitlement when they do not wish to take up the offer of an early admission. The local authority has undertaken a survey of parents and schools to review its admissions arrangements; this represents a sound basis for further work.

114. The arrangements for admissions to community primary schools are managed centrally. This is an entirely legitimate approach, but information flow to schools about applications for admission to primary schools is often problematic. There are few appeals at the primary stage but the last hearing date of 11 July is too late for such a small number. Given the complexity of the secondary transfer arrangements in Thurrock, and the issues arising from them, the absence of an Admissions Forum is unsatisfactory. The local authority has a difficult task in seeking to co-ordinate and track transfers. There are ten secondary schools in the borough operating eight different admissions policies. In addition, seven per cent of children transfer to schools in other authorities. The picture is a confusing one for parents who are confronted with a plethora of admissions forms and criteria. The authority tried to resolve difficulties by moving towards a single transfer form but this has proved unsuccessful. There are no appeals for community schools, but a large number for foundation and aided schools, albeit with a very low success rate. As with primary admissions, the information flow to schools, and their lack of involvement in tracking applications, is a weakness.

Provision of education otherwise than at school

115. The LEA is taking reasonable steps to secure and monitor a number of areas of provision for educating pupils otherwise than at school. However, it has had limited success with regard to provision for excluded pupils. The recently appointed head of Thurrock education support service (TESS) takes the lead on provision for education otherwise than at school in close co-operation with the Culver Education Centre, which is the borough's pupil referral unit (PRU). The PRU received a positive Section 10 inspection earlier this year. Nevertheless, strategies for the reintegration of excluded pupils are under-developed and not effective. Primary schools are dissatisfied with the lack of alternative provision for pupils in Key Stage 2. Secondary schools and the LEA have not been able to agree a formal 'hard to place' protocol. A recent value for money study of the LEA's arrangements recommended that the LEA work with schools to identify a 'community approach' to education rather than operating in isolation. It has not yet succeeded.

116. The lack of a comprehensive database for tracking the attainment and progress of individual pupils has been an impediment to monitoring the performance of pupils out of school, but this is now being addressed. Useful information and advice is provided for parents who choose to educate their children at home. During the last academic year, 41 pupils were withdrawn for this reason. The advisory service makes home visits to ensure that the education provided is satisfactory and works

closely with the education welfare service. A further 31 pupils received alternative tuition because of illness during the last academic year.

Attendance

117. The LEA takes reasonable steps to ensure that its statutory duties with regard to school attendance and pupils' welfare are met. Attendance in primary and secondary schools remains below the national average and unauthorised absence is above average in primary schools and in line with national figures for secondary schools. Up to 40 per cent of parents take their children on holiday in term time. However, the impact of this on national tests has been reduced by judicious action on the part of headteachers. Improving attendance is rightly an EDP priority.

118. Support to improve attendance is a strength of the LEA. The work of the education welfare service is highly regarded by schools in Thurrock. The leadership and management of the education welfare service (EWS) are effective and have been instrumental in changing attitudes towards attendance in Thurrock. EDP targets are met. Bureaucracy has been reduced and issues of compliance are handled more confidently by schools. Education welfare officers concentrate on supporting school policies to improve attendance and conducting home visits. The service's robust approach to prosecution and the proactive work of the service in the community has enhanced its credibility among schools. The EWS works closely with the local police who pioneered truancy patrols in the Tilbury area. Pagers have been issued to parents of persistent truants. The EWS also works well with local Traveller groups.

Behaviour support

119. The quality of LEA support to improve pupils' behaviour in school is too variable and unsatisfactory overall. There is little ownership of the Behaviour Support Plan or its subsequent revision in schools. Serious concerns remain about the overall effectiveness of the LEA's behaviour support strategy and the commitment of Thurrock schools to the inclusion of pupils with behavioural difficulties. There has been a decline in the number of permanent exclusions, but there has also been a worrying increase in the number of pupils excluded for a fixed term in both primary and secondary schools.

120. The support provided by TESS is too variable, and there is a sense of despair in a number of schools in challenging areas who feel that they have exhausted all the behaviour management strategies offered by the LEA; including advice from TESS. There is evidence that the situation has improved this term. TESS now attend the school-led planning meetings initiated by the cluster SENCOs. However, the work of TESS is further undermined by the lack of an agreed strategy among secondary schools about the arrangements for excluded pupils and those with emotional and behavioural difficulties. There are clear examples of schools with exemplary approaches to behaviour management, which the LEA has been slow to disseminate.

121. The funding of nurture groups, known as learning development groups, using pupil retention monies has focussed schools on developing more effective in-house strategies for reducing exclusion rates. However, there are issues in some schools about the deployment and expertise of teachers and learning support assistants in ensuring that pupils continue to receive their entitlement to a satisfactory curriculum in these groups.

Health, safety, welfare, child protection

122. The LEA takes reasonable steps to meet its statutory duties with regard to the health, safety and welfare of pupils and staff. The head of the governor support service ensures that governors are kept informed of their responsibilities for health and safety in schools. Schools have access to corporate training on health and safety matters provided by the Council's planning and resources department. Security issues are handled by the LEA's premises planning officer.

123. The school nursing service provides a useful channel for liaison with the Health Authority and there are good examples of joint working with the EWS to reduce condoned absence. Child protection procedures are known and training is regularly provided for designated officers in school and members of the EWS. A notable development has been the 'Zero Tolerance/Respect' initiative run by a local women's group to tackle young peoples' attitudes to sexual and physical violence. The project, based in a local secondary school, has been successful in attracting Home Office funding for wider dissemination in Thurrock. Communication between education and social services is not always effective at school level, although it is better at more senior levels. Schools report anxieties about the responses of social workers to their concerns about child protection matters.

Children in public care

124. Arrangements for the support of young people in public care have improved recently and are now satisfactory. The recent appointment of a part time liaison teacher whose role is to monitor the education provision and the attainment of pupils has assisted in this. However, members have not taken a sufficiently active lead in discharging the Council's role as 'corporate parent' to young people in public care in Thurrock. The actions outlined in the Quality Protects action plan had little impact and there were concerns about the accuracy of data provided by social services. The education department has taken a more proactive role this year in collecting the information from schools and tracking those young people known to schools. A joint protocol between social services and education is being re-launched this term to stimulate a greater understanding among schools, social workers and members of their statutory responsibilities towards young people in public care in Thurrock.

Ethnic minority children

125. Individual support for ethnic minority pupils is generally satisfactory, but there are some weaknesses at the strategic level. Provision for pupils with English as an additional language is generally satisfactory, but implementation of the Ethnic

Minority and Traveller Achievement Grant (EMTAG) has been limited. The management and deployment of the services to support ethnic minority pupils has been completely reorganised but progress in the raising of attainment has been hampered on three counts. First, by the resistance of some schools to collect and monitor performance data by ethnicity. This is partly because the number of ethnic minority pupils is small and there is a reluctance among some headteachers to single out particular groups or individual pupils for attention on the basis of their colour. This continues to place the responsibility for collecting and monitoring this data on those staff appointed by the LEA to provide support for pupils with EAL, rather than the school itself. Secondly, until the implementation of its planned comprehensive pupil database, the LEA has not had fully reliable information on the numbers and location of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds and was therefore in no position to challenge such views. Lastly, raising the attainment of underachieving groups is not given sufficient focus in the EDP, which is a weakness.

126. Support for pupils of Traveller heritage is good in primary schools. The Traveller education service supports pupils in 16 primary and four secondary schools. The service has been reorganised and there is now more systematic monitoring of pupils' attainment and attendance levels. A project on helping pupils to make the transition from primary to secondary education has had limited success. Although there have been problems in recruiting specialist teachers and learning support assistants, good relationships have been established through joint working with the EWS who have a dedicated officer to work with pupils and their families.

Combating social exclusion

127. The Council is in the process of responding to recommendations on how it might improve its approach to equality of opportunity arising from a recent exercise in peer review by the Improvement & Development Agency. Members did not embed a commitment to equal opportunities within their early vision for the new authority and Thurrock is somewhat off the pace in terms of corporate leadership in promoting cultural diversity. The Council is hopeful that the newly formed Thurrock racial unity support task group will be successful in monitoring its progress in promoting cultural diversity.

128. The education department contributes to the Council's measures to promote the social inclusion of vulnerable pupils and their families through the work of the special needs and pupil & student services. The PRU provides 'time out' opportunities for disaffected pupils in Key Stages 3 and 4. Primary and secondary schools have set up alternative arrangements to support pupils at risk of exclusion either on their own initiative or through the use of standards funds to establish learning development or nurture groups. However, there is insufficient overall coherence in the LEA's approach to social exclusion and the rising number of fixed term exclusions and the poor reintegration rates for excluded pupils are causes for concern.

Combating racism

129. The Council has responded to the recommendations in the Macpherson Report following the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence and has produced an action plan with clear outcomes for each of the key corporate departments. The Council

initiated a programme of awareness raising seminars entitled 'Achieving a Cultural Shift' which was thought-provoking. However, the impetus has not been sustained by senior officers in the education department and little progress has been made in tackling the specific targets outlined in the corporate action plan. These include a requirement to develop processes to monitor incidents of racial harassment in schools; to promote the further development of anti-racist policies and to link these to new national guidelines on inclusion. Despite the establishment of a working party of headteachers and officers, progress has been unacceptably slow and disappointing. Schools are not wholly comfortable with ethnic monitoring. Education is not represented on the racial incidents panel and the LEA has no procedures in place for schools to report racial incidents. The opportunities afforded by the recent initiative on citizenship do not appear to have provoked a debate on how Thurrock schools might promote greater tolerance and welcome diversity.

Recommendations

- The progress of pupils educated otherwise than at school and those in public care should be monitored more systematically;
- Governors and headteachers should be assisted in reducing the number of fixed term exclusions in primary and secondary schools;
- Arrangements for behaviour support should be improved to enable schools to manage poor behaviour more effectively and to reduce exclusions;
- Steps should be taken to ensure that schools comply with DfEE requirements by monitoring the attainment of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds more systematically.;
- More urgent progress should be made in implementing the recommendations of the Macpherson Inquiry that pertain to schools;
- The admissions booklet for primary should be revised to include timing of admissions to reception, clarify the parental rights concerning the reservation of a place offered. The final date for appeals for primary admissions should be brought forward;
- An Admissions Forum should be established to improve the secondary admission and transfer arrangements and the reintegration of excluded pupils; and
- Schools should be assisted better to understand the asset management planning information held by them.

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve the overall effectiveness of the work of the LEA:

- The coherence between corporate plans and those within the education department should be improved to facilitate a closer alignment of education priorities with the aims of the Council;
- Members and the Chief Executive should establish mechanisms for clearer oversight of the education department and its contribution to the corporate objectives through more rigorous monitoring, evaluation and performance management;
- Members and the Chief Executive should provide a more effective strategic steer for the education department and the director should provide stronger leadership in co-ordinating the work of the department to improve schools;
- A more rigorous approach to service planning and performance management should be introduced within the education department;
- The process of identifying budget pressures within the LEA should be improved and the involvement of schools as major stakeholders in consultations should be secured. In particular, the local authority must ensure that the SEN budget is monitored more systematically;
- The process of bringing together the separate data on schools held in different parts of the department should be speeded up to inform priorities for action; and
- The strategy and timescale for integrating the administrative and curriculum ICT networks should be set out and communicated to schools.

In order to help support school improvement and raise attainment:

- The EDP should be revised at an appropriate time to provide a clearer focus on improving the quality of management and leadership in schools, and on raising expectations;
- The strategy for the monitoring and support of schools should be more clearly set out, clarifying schools' entitlement and distinguishing between those activities funded centrally and those schools are able to purchase;
- The triggers for identification of schools causing concern, and for intervention, should to be clarified and communicated more effectively to schools;
- The strategies used for supporting schools identified as causing concern should be evaluated to establish best practice and improve future interventions;
- Advisers should provide unequivocal views about the quality of leadership and management in their schools and these should be communicated more effectively to governors;
- The strategies for supporting and improving the effectiveness of senior and middle management should be improved, particularly in those schools where these are obvious weaknesses in management and leadership;
- Greater efforts should be made to work with schools to assist with the recruitment and retention of teachers;
- An approach should be agreed with schools for assessing progress of pupils from entry to Key Stage 1, and for improving the effectiveness of support available for the development of early years education; and

- More effective liaison should be developed with the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership to ensure a coherent focus on the raising of attainment in early years provision.

In order to ensure more efficient use of resources:

- The scope and appropriateness of the “Children in School” Best Value review should be reconsidered in the light of the LEA’s capacity to implement it;
- Schools should be assisted to secure Best Value through providing greater challenge on the application of the Best Value principles statements, kitemarking, and implementing more consistent surveys of school assessments of service performance and need;
- Schools should be challenged more effectively on the level of balances to ensure, wherever possible, that spending benefits children currently in the school; and
- Schools should be assisted better to understand the asset management planning information held by them.

In order to promote inclusion:

- The strategic planning for SEN should be improved. In particular, there should be wide consultation on a comprehensive and fully costed policy to increase the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools and to clarify the implications of this in the School Organisation Plan;
- The progress of pupils educated otherwise than at school and those in public care should be monitored more systematically;
- Governors and headteachers should be assisted in reducing the number of fixed term exclusions in primary and secondary schools;
- Arrangements for behaviour support should be improved to enable schools to manage poor behaviour more effectively and to reduce exclusions;
- Steps should be taken to ensure that schools comply with DfEE requirements by monitoring the attainment of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds more systematically;
- More urgent progress should be made in implementing the recommendations of the Macpherson Inquiry that pertain to schools;
- The admissions booklet for primary should be revised to include timing of admissions to reception, clarify the parental rights concerning the reservation of a place offered. The final date for appeals for primary admissions should be brought forward; and
- An Admissions Forum should be established to improve the secondary admission and transfer arrangements and the reintegration of excluded pupils.

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