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IN EDUCATION**

**INSPECTION OF
REDCAR AND CLEVELAND
LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

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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 also took account of the Local Government Act 1999 insofar as it relates to the work undertaken by the LEA on Best Value. The inspection used the *Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities* which focuses on the effectiveness of local education authority (LEA) work to support school improvement.

2. The inspection was 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, council staff, headteachers, teachers, governors, and representatives of the dioceses and other partners. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on aspects of the LEA's work was circulated to 67 schools. The overall response rate was 88 per cent.

3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to one pupil referral unit, one special school, two infant schools, eight primary schools, and five secondary schools. These 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 to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in the schools and provides value for money. Evidence from other HMI visits to schools in the LEA was also considered.

COMMENTARY

4. Redcar and Cleveland is a borough with great social and economic diversity. Much of its population lives in disadvantaged towns or villages, some of which have been greatly affected by the rundown of the chemical and steel industries. Overall, the authority is in the most disadvantaged ten per cent in the country. However, it also contains prosperous suburban areas, and rural localities of great natural beauty. The borough is undergoing steady population decline that is particularly affecting the disadvantaged areas. The total school population is expected to reduce by 20 per cent over the next ten years.

5. Schools in the authority are performing broadly in line with national averages. The rate of improvement in pupils' attainment is generally similar to the national rate, but improvement in GSCE performance at the higher grades has been faster than the national trend. Levels of school attendance are similar to the national figure, but improving faster than nationally. The proportion of pupils excluded from school is in line with the national rate but is reducing more rapidly. Overall, therefore, this is a picture of at least reasonable standards and consistent, sometimes rapid, improvement. No school in the authority has been found to require special measures since it was set up in 1996.

6. The borough council is keen to tackle regeneration and has been successful in attracting a considerable amount of additional grant funding to the area. It has made positive efforts to develop an inclusive education service. Partnership work is strong in supporting education in the disadvantaged areas. The council's plans for education are generally very sound and it has made a significant commitment of funding to schools. The council is now considering establishing a major strategic partnership with a private organisation for the provision of most technical and support services, and is moving towards a more corporate approach to its work.

7. Most schools value the LEA's support highly. This reflects the strong commitment by the authority to school improvement and to early intervention in supporting pupils with special educational needs (SEN). Leadership on school improvement matters by the director and senior managers has much strength. The LEA's support services are generally expert and well managed. They operate coherently and on the basis of good information about schools' and pupils' needs. The large majority of the education department's work has been effective, for instance in promoting higher standards of literacy and numeracy, and in expanding and improving early years provision. The authority has intervened in schools when necessary. It has successfully delegated some aspects of SEN provision to schools.

8. In contrast to these many strengths of provision, however, stand a few areas of significant weaknesses in aspects of planning and evaluation, and of provision to schools by other departments of the council. Support for one current school reorganisation has been unsatisfactory. Elected members have not developed a clear and comprehensive strategy for managing the educational impact of the inevitable decline in school rolls. Elected members need to introduce better ways of evaluating the LEA's progress, and this will necessitate the better use of success criteria within the education department. Some corporate services give inadequate support to school improvement.

9. The LEA has a very strong tradition of consultation with schools. Much of its development work is planned after thorough discussion with schools and other stakeholders about local needs. This has led to consensus on most issues, a source of considerable strength. However, this desire for consensus also has the potential to impede innovation. The LEA has not sufficiently pressed schools to take a stronger control of their own development, and has further to go in promoting some schools' ability to evaluate their own needs. It also needs to be more rigorous in tailoring the level of support it provides to the particular needs of each school. It has allowed schools to develop an unclear view of its policy for intervention in schools with difficulties.

10. Overall, though, the authority carries out the large majority of its functions satisfactorily or better. The following are particularly effective:

- support for literacy;
- support for numeracy;
- support for most aspects of curriculum information and communications technology (ICT);
- support for the use of performance data;
- support for early years;
- support for gifted and talented pupils;
- the expertise of school improvement work;
- provision for pupils educated otherwise than at school;
- child protection, health and safety and welfare work;
- budget and financial advice;
- personnel support;
- support for asset management; and
- partnership with other agencies.

11. There are, however, weaknesses in the following functions:

- corporate support for the management use of ICT in schools;
- strategic planning of school places;
- repairs and maintenance of school premises;
- evaluation of provision by elected members; and
- the specification of success criteria within the Education Development Plan.

12. The LEA has made considerable progress in promoting school improvement and our visits to schools showed that its work is effective. The authority is well-run and gives good value for money. We are confident that, with its good track record on support to schools and with its new approach to corporate work, it has the capacity to improve further.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

13. Redcar and Cleveland was established as a unitary authority in April 1996. It is an area with a wide diversity of communities with different socio-economic characteristics. These include densely populated industrial towns with high levels of unemployment and disadvantage on the south bank of the River Tees, small towns in east Cleveland with even higher levels of unemployment, and one very prosperous suburban area. The overall rate of unemployment (9.8 per cent) is more than double the national average and includes some areas where the rate is almost four times the national average. Major former employers were the steel and chemical industries, which have undergone dramatic decline in recent years. The borough is ranked seventh in one national index of local deprivation. It lies within a Health Action Zone, and almost half of its children live in low income households.

14. The total population is just under 137,900, of which about 31,200 are under 16. The school population is expected to decline by 20 per cent in the next ten years, among the highest rates of reduction nationally. The proportion of minority ethnic pupils is 0.7 per cent, well below the national average, which is 11.7 per cent.

15. The LEA maintains 67 schools. Forty-four primary schools are 5 to 11 year-olds, four are infant, and four are junior. All primary and infant schools have nursery units for three and four year olds, and there are enough places to provide for all four year olds and 99 per cent of three year olds. Two special schools cater for pupils aged 3 to 19. There are 13 secondary schools with age range 11-16, three of which will amalgamate in the near future. In addition, there is a pupil referral unit. An Education Action Zone has been established in the east Cleveland area, where the first of the LEA's Sure Start programmes is operating.

16. The percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals (27.8 per cent) is above the national average (17.4 per cent). As nationally, the proportion is higher in primary schools than in secondary schools. Statements of special educational need have been made for 2.2 per cent of primary pupils, compared with 2.9 per cent in similar LEAs and 2.7 per cent nationally, and for 3.9 per cent of those in secondary schools compared with 4.3 per cent in similar LEAs and 4.0 per cent nationally.

Performance

17. The baseline scheme used to determine the attainment of pupils on entry to primary education is particular to Redcar and Cleveland, so that no reliable statistical comparison can be made either nationally or with other LEAs. OFSTED inspection evidence indicates that attainment on entry was below average in a higher proportion of schools than nationally and in similar LEAs.

18. The percentage of pupils completing Key Stage 1 in 2000 attaining at least level 2 in reading and mathematics was very close to both national and similar LEA averages. In reading, the attainment of girls was higher than that of boys by a wider margin than nationally. A higher proportion attained this level in writing than the

averages for both similar LEAs and nationally. The rate of improvement in writing since 1996 has been higher than that nationally and in similar LEAs. In reading it has been higher than the national rate, but close to that for similar LEAs. However, in mathematics the rate of improvement is below both national and similar LEA rates.

19. At the end of Key Stage 2 in 2000, 74.6 per cent of pupils attained Level 4 or higher in English, 71.1 per cent in mathematics and 85.6 per cent in science. In all three subjects these results were broadly in line with their equivalents nationally and in similar LEAs. Boys' results were lower than the national equivalent, while girls did better than the national average. The rates of improvement in mathematics and science since 1996 have been in line with those nationally and of similar LEAs, but the improvement in English has been faster than the national rate or that of similar LEAs.

20. Last year 63.1 per cent of pupils attained Level 5 and above in English at the end of Key Stage 3; 64 per cent did so in mathematics and 58.7 per cent in science. These were all broadly in line with national and similar LEA averages. In all cases the gender difference was close to that found nationally. The rate of improvement in English since 1996 has been well below the national and similar LEA rates. Standards in mathematics improved in line with the national rate but the rate of improvement was less than that of similar LEAs. In science the improvement rate was above the national average and close to that in similar LEAs.

21. In summer 2000, 45.8 per cent of year 11 pupils obtained five or more A* to C grades in GCSE. This was broadly in line with the national average, and higher than the average for similar LEAs. The gender difference was close to that found nationally. The rate of improvement has been better than both national and similar LEA rates. 95.1 per cent obtained at least one A*-G grade, very close to the national average and equivalent LEAs. The average points score (APS) was 37.2, broadly in line with the national average and that for similar LEAs. The rate of improvement is in line with the national rate and that for similar LEAs. Of the Redcar and Cleveland secondary schools six have results that are broadly similar to those of similar schools, one has worse results, four have better results and one has much better results.

22. Inspection reports show that the proportion of primary schools which is good or very good is slightly lower than that in similar LEAs and nationally. About a third were in need of some improvement, compared to just over a quarter nationally. None have been found to need much improvement. Almost a quarter of secondary schools were very good, almost twice the national proportion. However, almost twice as many secondaries were found to need improvement as nationally, including two schools in 13 needing much improvement. No schools have been found to require special measures, although two primary schools are currently designated as having serious weaknesses.

23. In 1999-2000, the proportion of pupils permanently excluded from school was broadly in line with the national and similar LEA equivalents.

24. Attendance in primary and secondary schools last year was broadly in line with the national average, and above that of similar authorities. The rate of

improvement in the last two years has been better than the national rate in both phases.

Funding

25. In 2000 the LEA achieved its pledge to raise education spending to the standard spending assessment (SSA). This was within a difficult financial context and required reductions in other areas of council spending.

26. The Local Schools Budget in 2000-01 is £2,568 per pupil, in line with similar authorities but below the average for unitary authorities (£2,675) and below the national average (£2,755). However, the delegated sum per pupil (ISB) is higher than similar authorities, as the level of delegation to schools is higher at 86.6 per cent. In 2000-01, the 13.0 per cent increase in delegated funding per pupil was higher than that nationally or in similar authorities.

2000-01	Redcar & Cleveland	Statistical neighbour average	Unitary LEA average	England LEA average
Local Schools Budget per pupil	£2,568	£2,565	£2,675	£2,755
Individual Schools Budget Per primary pupil	£1,843	£1,729	£1,807	£1,869
Individual Schools Budget Per secondary pupil	£2,485	£2,461	£2,380	£2,811

27. Central funding of educational work by the LEA is basically in line with similar authorities. It is exactly so for school improvement, with funding for access just below and central administration just above. Central spending on SEN is below similar authorities, as some is delegated to special units in mainstream schools. Spending on home to school transport is £37 per pupil, well below similar authorities and half the national average of £74 per pupil.

28. The borough has increased capital investment in education, mainly through large increases in grants, but it is contributing £1.5 million out of the total £12 million capital in next three years, and is developing a number of PFI schemes.

29. The council has had poor corporate financial health, although improvement is now underway. From 1996 to 2000 the borough had the second highest rate of council tax nationally. Savings in some services are now planned to raise overall balances to an acceptable level and allow the council to meet key priorities. In 2000 the external auditor indicated there were weaknesses in key corporate financial controls.

30. The council has, wisely, begun to plan its budgets over a three-year period, although this is currently based on departmental bids for growth or offers of savings, rather than on a fundamental appraisal of need. This year a restructuring of the

corporate senior management has saved £199,000. Overall, £2 million savings were identified which enabled the rate of council tax to be frozen, and a further £1 million to be redirected to key priorities.

Council structure

31. Redcar and Cleveland borough council became a unitary authority with education responsibilities in 1996. At the time of the inspection the council comprised 31 Labour members, 14 Conservatives, 11 Liberal Democrats, and two independents. After reform of its structure in 2000 the council established an executive (the leader, deputy leader and eight members), a scrutiny committee, and a number of specialist advisory panels. The executive includes a lead member for lifelong learning and leisure. There is an advisory panel for lifelong learning and leisure, chaired by this lead member. At the time of the inspection there was also a Best Value committee, and a policy and resources committee, both about to be phased out as part of the reforms.

32. In general, there is cross-party agreement about the main aspects of educational policy. Minority party members receive briefings and are involved in consultation.

33. The scrutiny system established last year has not been successful as far as education is concerned, because too much was expected of one general committee. It has therefore not been able to give a significant amount of its time to education, and as a result there has been no evaluation by council members of key issues such as progress made on the Education Development Plan (EDP). The council has already recognised this weakness in the structure, and is about to change the advisory panels to specialist scrutiny groups. Henceforth, therefore, there will be a specialist scrutiny group for education. This will be a structural improvement.

34. The council has a chief executive, four assistant chief executives with corporate responsibilities, and four chief officers with departmental responsibilities, of whom the director of education is one. The chief executive is encouraging departments towards a more corporate approach to planning and policy-making, and towards a better link between provision and evaluation.

35. The council is keen to ensure that the local community receives efficient services that meet its needs. With this intention, it has recently embarked on a major exercise, "Mapping the Market", to test the feasibility of a private sector partnership. The intention is that this would bring in expertise and capital investment, and could lead to complete outsourcing of some services, including certain ones currently provided by the education department.

The Education Development Plan

36. The EDP for 1999-2002 was drawn up soon after the LEA had already produced its strategic plan covering a broader range of work. Consultation on the strategic plan had been very effective and the priorities of the EDP therefore emerged from what had already been agreed. Most schools value the EDP as clear

and relevant, although secondaries are less enthusiastic than primaries and several are critical of the relevance for them of the priorities.

37. The preparation of the EDP and the strategic plan drew on the education department's annual analysis of school performance. This analysis is done thoroughly, and the current version has identified useful issues for future action. The education department has a sound system for continuous review of the key issues facing it, based on a range of evidence. It is therefore in a good position to respond to changing needs. The planning of new activities by the education department has been based on this analysis of needs, and schools have been kept well informed of new work at briefing sessions and through newsletters. This works satisfactorily as schools are generally aware of the current provision by the LEA. The biennial LEA strategic plan succeeds in creating a whole view of the council's educational work.

38. The EDP has eight priorities:

- support for school self-evaluation and improvement;
- professional development for leadership and management;
- schools giving causing cause for concern;
- literacy;
- numeracy;
- access and entitlement;
- curriculum enhancement; and
- pupil learning and attainment.

39. The last two priorities cover (in addition to ICT which is a national priority), a collection of activities intended to ensure that the LEA was able to give attention to issues of local significance. Nevertheless, there is scope for a reduction in this range of activities in the future as national work on some is now available to schools. Overall, the EDP costs are broadly similar to other LEAs.

40. The EDP was reasonably detailed for its first year of implementation but activities for subsequent years were only lightly sketched in. Some aspects are of only historical interest, as national and local developments pursued by the LEA have overtaken the EDP, as in the case of numeracy work. Therefore, the LEA's action has in some respects outpaced its plan. Better guides to more recent work are provided in detailed plans such as the ICT action plan, or in the comprehensive summary of planned action in the education department service development plan. These are all broadly consistent with the original intent of the EDP.

41. The historical nature of the EDP is clearly expressed in two respects. Since it was established, two fundamentally important projects have been implemented: the East Cleveland Education Action Zone and the Excellence in Cities (EiC) initiative. Neither was anticipated in the EDP. Schools affected by these activities, naturally, tend to see them as being particularly significant, with the LEA's EDP work being seen as more of a background. The implementation of EiC, in particular, is filling a gap for some secondary schools as the EDP priorities tended to emphasise primary phase work. The LEA has kept in close touch with the two initiatives and has ensured harmony with its own work.

42. The weakness of the EDP was that too many of the success criteria were weak, tending to concern the implementation of the activity rather than the impact on pupils' achievements. The current education department service plan, a later document, sets useful objectives and the departmental monitoring systems described elsewhere in this report, record progress against these. However, there are considerable opportunities across the full range of planning systems to define success criteria more consistently in terms of the outcomes achieved by pupils.

43. The LEA's targets for pupils' attainment, expressed in the EDP, aim for a significant rise in achievement at KS2 by 2002. Considerable progress has already been made, as the interim English and mathematics targets for 2000 have been surpassed. The targets for KS4 also aim for significant improvement by 2002, but only one of the three interim GCSE targets was achieved in 2000, although in the case of one of the other targets the shortfall was minimal. Three secondary schools failed to achieve any of their three GCSE targets in 2000. This highlights the need for reinforced support for secondary schools, which is now being provided through the Excellence in Cities initiative.

44. The LEA's monitoring records and the evidence of our visits to schools shows that the EDP activities have broadly been implemented as intended. Work on literacy and numeracy has gone further than originally planned. Work in supporting schools in the curriculum use of ICT has proceeded successfully except that significant problems have been experienced in connecting schools to the corporate ICT network and this has impeded their development. Progress in improving provision for early years, and for gifted and talented pupils has been good. Activity outlined in the EDP in developing provision for SEN and promoting social inclusion has been implemented effectively. Work supporting schools causing concern has been implemented broadly as planned, and the LEA has modified its original plan sensibly in the light of changing needs. Some progress has been made in supporting schools' capacity for self-evaluation.

The allocation of resources to priorities

45. The council allocates educational resources appropriately in line with its priorities. In some instances, such as provision for early years and for pupils educated other than at school, it has targeted local needs well. It has consulted schools well about its budget, and it gives schools clear information about their own budgets.

46. As the education budget has expanded, funding has increasingly been delegated to schools rather than being retained centrally. Some new funding has been directed into the primary sector, in response to concerns from schools. The funding formula has been reviewed with the close involvement of a budget reference group of headteachers, and it is well understood by schools. It includes several factors which provide additional funding for schools serving disadvantaged communities. There is now some concern in schools serving advantaged areas that, since recent increases in the Standards Fund and Excellence in Cities are also targeted to those schools, this may become over-compensatory. Increasingly the formula provides protection to small schools and those with falling rolls. These

factors rightly protect schools from a sudden large fall in their budget, but will not be sustainable in the longer term as the population declines.

47. The council has been very successful in bidding for a wide range of resources from external sources, and the education department has played a significant role in this. Additional funding has come from sources such as the Single Regeneration Budget, European Union funding, and the New Opportunities Fund. The Neighbourhood Renewal Fund will also provide £7m over three years and may include some targeted education support. The education department has co-ordinated the use of such resources well, particularly in promoting community education and social inclusion.

Structures for achieving Best Value

48. Redcar and Cleveland borough was a pilot Best Value authority. However, it was not able to implement Best Value processes as early as it had hoped, and the outcomes of first reviews showed that the processes were weak. The council has now recognised that operating a large number of narrowly focused Best Value reviews, as originally planned, had limited worth and is unlikely to lead to a significant improvement in the quality of provision. Accordingly, it has now begun to challenge itself more seriously and has widened the scope of self-review, through "Mapping the Market" to include consideration of a major private sector partnership. At the same time, the chief executive's department is working to improve the reliability of performance indicators used across council services as these were initially unreliable, although less so in education than in some other departments.

49. In contrast to some of its other review work, the first educational review, which was of the early years development and childcare partnership, was conducted successfully and will lead to real service improvements. This review is discussed in detail in an appendix to this report.

50. As yet, schools have only a basic awareness of the Best Value system. However, they are used to a good level of consultation by the education department and recognise that it is keen to ensure that it provides good services.

51. The council is now beginning to develop performance management and individual appraisal across all services, linked to the major strategic aims of the Council and individual service plans. However, the education department has already made some progress on both of these and its systems for monitoring and evaluation are broadly sound. There is a good structure of continual monitoring by assistant directors of the performance of each service unit, using a range of indicators, and the chief executive monitors overall progress by the department twice yearly. The main weakness is that success criteria do not always focus sufficiently well on pupils' achievement. A further weakness is that the performance management system within the department, although well conceived, is still not complete. Staff development review does not yet link completely to performance review, but consideration is being given to uniting these strands.

Recommendations

In order to improve monitoring and evaluation:

- ensure that, where possible, future educational plans have success criteria defined in terms of pupils' achievement; and
- establish a mechanism for regular review by elected members of the performance of the education department.

In order to simplify planning systems:

- ensure that the next Education Development Plan is regularly updated to take account of changing needs and to take account of action deriving from future LEA strategic plans.

In order to ensure fair distribution of funding:

- monitor the school funding formula in the light of any new additional funding gained from external funding streams to ensure that the overall distribution represents the council's policy and meets schools' varied needs.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Implications of other functions

52. The overall work of the whole education department focuses very well on school improvement. This is the result of the strong emphasis given to school improvement by the director and his senior management team. The four service arms (school effectiveness, resources and planning, lifelong learning, and pupil, parent and student services) work together well and the work of the various service units within them is cohesive. Attached advisers are in touch with the work of the range of services working in the schools. The services provided by the education department are generally well managed, and meet schools' needs. Support is being given effectively to schools' continually rising standards at a reasonable cost. The delegation to schools of in-school special educational needs (SEN) support work has been achieved successfully. Most management services are well managed and effectively support school improvement. They are successfully traded to schools, and are highly regarded by them. However, the corporate provision of administrative ICT support and property repairs and maintenance work, has been unsatisfactory and to some extent has impeded school improvement.

Monitoring, challenge, support, intervention

53. The LEA's monitoring, challenge, intervention and support of its schools are broadly satisfactory, with some good features. In many respects support is targeted where it is most needed, for instance in work in literacy and numeracy, in support for EiC, and in developments in early years work. However, although there are many clear and effective features in the provision, there are also aspects that fail to embrace the Code of Practice on LEA-School Relations fully.

54. The EDP satisfactorily details the LEA's intentions to carry out its programme of work with schools. It gives a good basis for the work of the school effectiveness service (SES) and, in particular, the attached advisers who work directly with schools. The SES has a good sense of purpose and is well managed. It comprises competent and experienced advisers and other specialist support staff, well qualified to meet the challenges of its work with schools. Sound use is made of consultants to broaden the expertise of the service. The service's knowledge of schools is good. Performance management of advisers is sound.

55. The LEA's monitoring of its schools is based on analysis of a broad range of performance factors. This provides the basis for a performance review strategy which involves at least two visits by an adviser to each school every year. The autumn term review by the attached adviser concerns target-setting. It is clearly conceived and meets schools' needs. The second review, negotiated between the attached adviser and the headteacher, comprises an evaluation of the performance or provision of the school in a particular aspect, mainly, but not exclusively, selected from a menu of aspects provided by the LEA. Although schools visited during this inspection indicated that they value these performance reviews, the strategy is currently insufficiently differentiated according to need. The LEA recognises this,

and has stated its intention to develop a more differentiated approach in its work with schools. However, the most recent analyses of officers' work programmes indicate that there has been only a minor reduction in the number of performance review days spent in schools over the last two years. Performance review reports, however, are generally comprehensive and evaluative, and felt by schools to accurately reflect oral feedback. Advisers' reviews of the literacy and numeracy strategies have, in particular, been successful in helping schools and the specialist LEA support teams to identify areas for further development.

56. The LEA mainly provides challenge to schools through its annual discussions with headteachers about their targets, and is perceived as doing so by the large majority of schools visited. However, there is also an element of challenge in the LEA's monitoring of other aspects of schools' provision, for instance, in schools given intensive support, increasing headteachers' understanding of how teaching can be made more effective.

57. The LEA intervenes in schools successfully through its strategy regarding schools causing concern. However, schools are not clear about this aspect of the LEA's role and it has been reluctant to make clear to them how and when it will use its powers. This has led to some confusion. This aspect is covered in more detail later in this report.

Collection and analysis of data

58. The LEA's support for schools in the collection and analysis of data is good. As part of the Tees Valley joint strategy group, the authority liaises well with four other local LEAs to provide a good range of comparative data at individual school level, which is based on pupils' prior attainment and socio-economic factors. Data are also provided on the attainment of minority ethnic pupils and children in public care. The schools' survey showed a very positive response to the quality of data provided, and, though at secondary level to a lesser extent, to the support for target setting. School visits during this inspection generally supported this judgement though most secondary schools indicated that, although they generally found LEA-produced data of some value, they made less use of it than that generated by themselves.

59. The target-setting process is thorough. It forms part of the performance review process, and is carried out during the autumn term by well-prepared attached advisers. All advisers are well trained in the use of performance data. Each year they attend a two-day residential course at the start of the autumn term to work jointly on analysing performance data, in preparation for their target-setting visits to schools. This is sensible, and is helping to achieve greater consistency in the process. Advisers' notes of visit indicate a willingness to engage in discussion about targets, and the school visits during this inspection showed that the review process is generally challenging for schools, especially the primaries.

60. The LEA suggests targets to schools that are primarily based on an aggregation of pupils' prior attainment but also, to provide challenge, take account of the impact of initiatives such as the literacy and numeracy strategies. The additional targets required of schools within the EAZ, and because of EiC, add a further level of

demand, although two of the LEA's overall GCSE targets for 2002 have not been raised in response to EiC, reasonably so given the failure to achieve the interim targets for 2000.

61. The management of the LEA service for data collection and analysis is good. The service manager works well with advisers, and contributes positively towards their professional training in data analysis. Data training is also provided for governors, primarily on a bespoke basis. Satisfactory training has also taken place for schools. Currently, however, there is only limited exchange of data electronically, although this has been recognised as an area for future development.

62. Overall, the LEA's analysis of the data has improved, and it is clear that the authority has the capacity to develop further its ability to meet the specific needs of all schools.

Support for literacy

63. The authority's support for literacy is good.

64. At the end of Key Stage 1, the proportion of pupils attaining at least Level 2 in writing is above the national figure; the proportion achieving this in reading is in line with the national figure. Attainment in English is in line with national results at Key Stages 2 and 3. The rate of improvement is above the national trend at Key Stages 1 and 2, but below it at Key Stage 3. At Key Stage 2, there has been a 12 per cent gain in the proportion of pupils attaining at least Level 4 in the last two years and the LEA is well set to achieve its 2002 target of 81 per cent.

65. The EDP activities for literacy are satisfactory but have been superseded by the literacy action plan, which is a more up-to-date document specifying schools' needs usefully. The action plan provides a clear focus for LEA support, including that from the specialist literacy team and, more generally, from advisers. It is clear, has appropriate targets and includes links with SEN and other focused areas. The only weakness that exists is the failure to identify more explicitly in the plan the developing use of ICT as an aid to pupils' progress in literacy, although work is now taking place in many schools as a result of national ICT training.

66. The management of the literacy support work is good. Relationships with schools are very good, with support work well focused. The range of training courses has increased over the last three years, mostly in relation to developments in the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). However, the LEA has also focused attention on its own areas of greatest need, in particular the performance of boys and writing. Particularly encouraging aspects include the production of literacy materials for boys and the attendance of many staff from the vast majority of primary schools at a writing course.

67. The LEA gives good support to those schools in greatest need. There have been nine summer schools since 1998, with a further five planned for 2001. Although the literacy team provides the majority of support work in schools, the contribution from attached advisers also plays an important part. All advisers have been trained in the NLS and in inspecting literacy, as part of an OFSTED-accredited training

programme. Regular updates are also included in weekly SES meetings. Good use is made of this experience in performance reviews, which include lesson observations, and provide class teachers and headteachers with an evaluation of the quality of work and the impact of the NLS. Performance review reports are detailed and generally well focused on those aspects of teaching that will impact, most directly, on the pupils' learning. The strategy for intensive support is clear, and is based on criteria that relate to pupils' performance. Schools in the first two cohorts receiving intensive support have made improvements of 23 per cent and 10 per cent respectively.

68. In-service training for teachers is well matched to aspects where there is the greatest need. The reading recovery programme is particularly impressive, and the better reading partnership and family literacy schemes are also contributing positively towards the raising of standards for those pupils most in need.

Support for numeracy

69. The LEA's support for numeracy is good.

70. Standards of attainment in mathematics are in line with national figures and with similar authorities at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. The LEA's rate of improvement is below the national trend at Key Stage 1, but is in line with the national rate at Key Stages 2 and 3. There has been a 14 per cent improvement over the last two years in the proportion of pupils attaining at least Level 4 at Key Stage 2. The LEA is now well in line to achieve its 2002 target of 78 per cent.

71. The numeracy team focuses its support well on schools in greatest need and, with the help of attached advisers, carries out some very useful lesson observations and feedback to schools on the impact and effectiveness of the National Numeracy Strategy (NNS). All advisers have received NNS and OFSTED-accredited training, in addition to regular updates via the weekly SES meetings. Sound links have also been established with the NLS team, primarily in relation to work in intensive support schools.

72. The LEA's numeracy action plan is sound and more up-to-date than the original description of work planned in the EDP. The main areas of work are clearly and concisely written, including the strategy for intensive support for low performing schools. Appropriate references are also made to the support work with leading maths teachers (LMTs), and in developing specific guidance for pupils with special educational needs. Training is of a high standard and is supportive of schools' needs.

73. The organisation and management of numeracy support are very good. Eighteen schools are currently identified for intensive support, in line with the NNS guidance. Although this is a large number of schools, the numeracy team has a clear and workable strategy for ensuring an appropriate level of support in line with individual schools' needs. Detailed, evaluative notes of work in schools receiving intensive support are used to focus on specific issues relevant to individual school's needs. Previous intensive support work has been effective, with all but three schools improving their standards in national tests. The strategy for leading mathematics

teachers is clear, and includes a very helpful booklet for use by schools. Three summer schools have been run since 1999 and a further three are planned for this year.

74. The LEA is usefully involved in other initiatives that focus on under-performing pupils. For instance, 'Springboard 5' is aimed at those pupils who leave Year 4 achieving below the level expected for their age.

Support for information and communications technology

75. The LEA's support for ICT in the curriculum is good. This is the result of well-managed provision by its ICT centre, and good strategic management within the SES. The overall vision for curriculum ICT is very clear, and progress towards meeting the LEA's objectives has been carefully planned, and largely successful. Schools generally regard the provision as strong: two-thirds of primaries and one third of secondaries rate it as good or very good.

76. The LEA has given clear, general advice and briefings to schools about their ICT development plans, and has helped some to improve their planning where it was weak. The installation of the computers for the National Grid for Learning (NGfL) has been successful overall, and the centre has helped schools to develop ICT networks with appropriate layouts of hardware. However, great difficulties have been experienced in equipping schools with internet access, because of incompatibility between the LEA's curriculum and administrative systems. At present, one third of primary schools do not have full network access to the internet, and many schools have established relatively expensive ISDN access for want of an effective link through the borough's corporate network. There is no LEA intranet.

77. Schools visited appreciated the quality of technical support provided by the LEA, though there are some indications that supply cannot meet demand. The LEA is making very good progress towards meeting government targets for computer provision and may exceed them.

78. The ICT centre has given full advice to schools about the national scheme for ICT training for teachers, and acts as a local trainer for several consortia. It has usefully worked in collaboration with one consortium to adapt the training materials to suit the ICT systems used in most local schools. The centre has provided basic skills training to teachers to ensure that they are at the right level to begin the national training, and this was found useful in schools visited during this inspection. The centre is also very active in offering a range of training courses on a traded basis, and this has led to a significant expansion of its income. Opportunities are promoted for teachers to undertake higher level, award-bearing courses, in conjunction with regional organisations.

79. The LEA is rightly keen to focus on improving the quality of pupils' attainment in ICT, which inspection evidence shows already to be strong in primary schools but slightly less good in secondaries. The ICT centre runs very useful meetings for primary school co-ordinators, has provided advice on primary school schemes of work to meet National Curriculum requirements, and has helped schools to analyse their coverage of the ICT curriculum and their use of ICT in the other subjects. It

runs an annual residential conference for secondary co-ordinators which also serves teachers from neighbouring authorities and elsewhere, and more occasional meetings. The LEA has not yet set overall targets for pupils' attainment in National Curriculum ICT, but has given additional support, clearly successful in one case, to certain schools where standards are weak, and has plans to develop this work systematically next year. The SES also has a programme for developing school's capacity to evaluate their own progress in ICT through its performance review system. The centre has made significant contributions in providing schools with a number of ways of making efficiency savings.

Support for schools causing concern

80. The LEA's work to support for schools causing concern has many strengths, though there are currently also some features that are unsatisfactory.

81. No schools in Redcar and Cleveland have been identified by OFSTED as needing special measures. Of the five that since 1997 have been identified as having serious weaknesses, two, both inspected in March 2000, remain in that category. The others, whose weaknesses were diagnosed earlier, have subsequently made satisfactory progress. In addition to the two that remain with serious weaknesses, four primary and two secondary schools have been identified by the LEA as causing concern, and seven others – one secondary and six primary – as needing close monitoring for a period of time.

82. Overall, the LEA's strategy is sound, and the support provided is a well-judged balance of help and monitoring. The school monitoring group undertakes regular reviews of all schools, bringing together a wide range of evidence, including performance analysis, reports from SES, and the views of any service that has had significant contact with the school. Schools may be placed in one or other of the causing concern or close monitoring categories. Additional support is then provided, together with further monitoring. Schools that have been in serious weaknesses move into the causing concern category for a time as an exit strategy. When the decision is reached that a school is causing concern, the SES and the school normally prepare a joint action plan. Such plans contain clearly written targets and specify what steps are to be taken to achieve these. However, this did not happen in the case of one school visited during this inspection where the action plan was merged with another action plan, thus obscuring the significance of the LEA's intervention. Where necessary, the LEA has taken strong and effective action to bring about improvement.

83. The recently redrafted policy statement for dealing with schools causing concern sets time limits to serve as targets by which improvement will be achieved, or for considering further intervention. The LEA has lists of indicators – key and supplementary – to guide the decision about which if any category a school should be in, but these have not been given wide circulation. Although the principles of identifying schools in difficulties and of allocating them more resources to resolve their problems have been discussed with headteachers, many are unclear about how the LEA identifies them and particularly about the criteria that are used. This does not help schools generally to know where they should look for weakness in their own reviews. There is similar uncertainty about what additional resources are likely to be

made available. The failure to ensure that schools understand these matters is preventing this part of the LEA's improvement strategy from being as effective as it might be. This is recognised by the LEA, which is planning to remedy it.

Support for governors

84. The support for governors is satisfactory, with some strong aspects. The proportion of vacancies on governing bodies is well below that found nationally or in similar authorities, and the LEA is developing a strategy for ensuring that all vacancies are filled suitably.

85. The service plan for governors' services rightly gives an emphasis to improving all aspects of support, both in statutory and non-statutory areas. However, the measures of success are of variable quality and often insufficiently precise to allow for effective monitoring of progress against stated objectives.

86. The management of the governors' support service is effective. Both the schools' survey and schools visited praised the quality of support provided by the LEA, especially the clerking service, which is popular and bought by the vast majority of schools.

87. The range and quality of information provided to governing bodies are good. The LEA is keeping governors well informed and up-to-date on current educational issues, via termly newsletters and through the three termly meetings with LEA representatives. The joint meeting between the chair, headteacher and senior LEA officers, at the beginning of each term, is particularly valued, although generally, all these meetings are contributing to the positive relationships that exist between the LEA and the vast majority of governing bodies.

88. The training programme for governors is satisfactory. Courses are of a satisfactory standard, well delivered by LEA officers. The induction pack for new governors is very helpful. It details clearly, the roles and responsibilities, together with information relating to the range of statutory responsibilities of governors. The induction programme, comprising five, three-hour modules, is very helpful to new governors. The opportunity to gain accreditation from this programme is good, although the take-up so far has been disappointing.

89. It is the custom for attached advisers to attend all or most meetings of a school's governing body, whatever the quality of the school. This was generally appreciated by the chairs of the schools visited during the inspection, because governors value the advice and guidance which advisers often provide. However, it is an expensive use of the LEA's resources, and in most cases is not justified by the schools' needs. The authority sensibly intends to reduce the attendance of advisers to one meeting annually.

Support for school management

90. Support for management is satisfactory. The LEA maintains a keen willingness to work in partnership with its headteachers, particularly through the Redcar and Cleveland headteachers' association (RACH). School inspection

reports show that, in the vast majority of schools, the quality of management is satisfactory or better. Nevertheless, the LEA responds well when a management issue arises or a need is identified.

91. The EDP has an appropriate priority related to professional development activities for headteachers, teaching staff and Governors. With the exception of network meetings for subject leaders and attached adviser attendance at governing body meetings, progress in all other activities is satisfactory.

92. Although the schools' survey showed a very positive response with regard to support for headteachers and middle managers, discussions with schools indicated that, in practice, a more variable provision existed for the latter.

93. The quality of attached advisers' support for senior managers is generally appreciated and valued by schools. The level of their expertise is good, particularly at primary level, where all attached advisers are former headteachers. The LEA's mentoring system for new headteachers is well thought out. The LEA actively supports national accreditation courses for senior staff, and is making satisfactory provision for supporting headteachers through formal meetings and attached adviser visits. A recently introduced initiative from a Beacon school, Towards Excellence, which is sponsored by the LEA, is also intended to support headteachers, but it is too early to judge the impact that this will have. The LEA has taken some steps in supporting school self-evaluation and has encouraged headteachers to attend courses to develop their understanding and confidence in school-based review activities. Attached advisers' visits are seen as part of this process, particularly when they are involved in a performance review of some aspect of the school. However, this is not yet a sufficiently strong aspect of the LEA's work. There is scope for the authority to be more active in encouraging schools, especially primaries, to develop more control over their own direction.

94. The provision for subject leaders is more limited, although there is a three-day generic course run by a deputy headteacher from the secondary Beacon school which covers potentially useful topics, but does not currently include aspects of a specific subject nature. With the exception of literacy, numeracy and ICT, other subjects are less well served in terms of regular opportunities for networking. The LEA has maintained a strong continuing professional development partnership (CPD) with the LEAs that made up the former county LEA. There is a satisfactory range of CPD opportunities that schools appreciate. There is a sound continuing professional development programme, which makes good use of local universities. The quality in the classroom project is impressive, and well linked to school improvement work within the SES. The co-ordinator links with advisers but work is focused directly on teaching and learning in schools. Some good work has recently been done on thinking skills and developing questioning techniques.

95. The support for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) is good. There is a welcome evening and induction programme that includes a range of appropriate activities to help the new teacher adjust to the varied demands of teaching. Other professional development courses to support NQTs cover potentially useful topics. Attached Advisers actively support schools with regard to NQTs, including lesson observations and discussions.

Early years

96. Support for early years education is of good quality. Standards of attainment and the quality of provision in schools and nursery units have improved in recent years. However, the use of a baseline test that is confined to Redcar and Cleveland does not enable either the LEA or schools to make a reliable comparison with national standards.

97. The LEA has a small surplus of places in its nursery units, although these are now being reduced. There are sufficient places for all four-year olds and 99 per cent of three-year olds whose parents want one, considerably in excess of national targets. Most children start in nursery classes soon after their third birthday, though in some areas where there is a pressure on places this is delayed by a term. Provision for young children with additional and/or special educational needs is good, and this is well integrated with social services and health provision.

98. A working group has produced very high quality guidance about the Foundation Stage, supported by training courses. The early years adviser organises regular meetings of network groups for foundation stage co-ordinators. In addition to the training arranged by the early years development and childcare partnership (EYDCP), relevant LEA training is made available free to staff working in private early years settings. Good progress is being made towards having a qualified teacher in all early years settings.

99. The LEA provides effective support to the new Sure Start initiative in east Cleveland. A large inter-disciplinary team, in close co-operation with the EAZ, is working with parent network groups, mother and toddler groups, and pre-natal classes. In addition, advice and support for pregnant teenagers is provided in homes and support groups. Capital building linked to three primary schools, the development of toy libraries and the commissioning of a play-bus are recent achievements. The initiative is managed with vision, and is providing good value for money. It is already making a significant impact on the quality of life of many young children and their parents in this disadvantaged part of the borough.

iv Recommendations

In order to promote school autonomy:

- develop a more differentiated programme of performance reviews in line with the principles outlined in the Code of Practice for LEA-school relations; and
- ensure that the attendance of Attached Advisers at governing body meetings is in proportion to schools' needs.

In order to ensure a transparent system of support for schools with weaknesses:

- give more information to all schools about the system and criteria for categorising schools causing concern and those needing close monitoring; and
- ensure that procedures for informing headteachers and governors of the LEA's concerns follow a formal procedure.

In order to improve support to schools in the use of ICT in the curriculum:

- implement a system of curriculum support for schools which is differentiated according to their needs; and
- take urgent action to ensure that every school has broad band access to the internet and to an LEA intranet.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate planning

100. The Redcar and Cleveland five-year community plan establishes six priorities, of which Invest in young people is one. This priority is usefully supported in the plan with a number of objectives and targets for improvement. Partner organisations are currently devising action plans to make progress on these. The draft borough strategic plan, very recently produced, also gives suitable priority to educational work, and sets out a number of relevant, detailed activities to be undertaken. The council has made a clear commitment of funding to education, and this is strongly appreciated in schools. However, beyond this, a significant minority of schools visited were not sufficiently clear about the council's overall strategic aims.

101. The full range of statutory plans with implications for education is in place, and there is a good level of coherence between them. The only significant weakness is that the borough ICT development plan does not tackle adequately the problem of improving connectivity to schools. The education department has produced a very valuable guide which summarises and weaves together the multiplicity of plans and initiatives in which it and schools are involved. This also clarifies the principles which govern the work of the education department, and which have emerged from the impressive joint development planning process. These principles are:

- raising standards;
- early intervention;
- availability of funding;
- promoting inclusion; and
- improving quality.

Schools visited were clear about the council's educational objectives and broadly support its detailed priorities.

102. The education department bases much of its planning on an annual analysis of performance by schools. This is thorough and informative, and it has guided detailed policy well.

103. The education department's service plan lists 81 actions for the current year, and identifies which service unit is responsible for each. The actions are described usefully, in terms which permit monitoring, although there is scope for linking more of these to measurable attainment by pupils. There is also a service development plan, which establishes detailed tasks for every unit. Overall, this is a sound system, which ensures that the department's activity is coherent and well focused on its main objectives. However, some success criteria are not well written and some lack milestones.

104. The council has a detailed scheme for delegation of authority to officers, and the director of education does much operational decision-making, often after discussion with the lead member. Matters that are brought to the executive for decision come with a clear recommendation by the director. The majority of policy initiatives have been uncontroversial and in line with national developments, and the advice provided has been good.

105. Decision-making procedures have usually been effective. The authority, however, has failed to give strong enough leadership on a few important matters, such as in managing falling rolls or informing schools about the criteria used to determine where there is a cause for concern.

106. The LEA makes a strong and valuable contribution to local partnership work, promoting the educational aspects of regeneration through its emphasis on lifelong learning. The director of education chairs the local learning partnership, which has made some progress in identifying local needs and securing funding for initiatives. This is an active group which, with its strong LEA support, is now in a good position to make a substantial commitment to the neighbourhood renewal programme. The LEA has also given effective support to the early years development and childcare partnership through the work of a senior officer and team, and has been closely involved in the establishment of the Sure Start programme. It co-operates with the local colleges in planning the development of adult and family learning. Collaborative work has been undertaken with the health authority and the health trust, and with the police authority, to support young people who are at risk. Useful developments in vocational and pre-vocational education have been made through good links with the training and enterprise councils. Throughout this range of partnership work the LEA has brought a useful sense of priorities and has committed much energy to long term developmental work.

107. Links with the east Cleveland Education Action Zone (EAZ) are sound and enable the zone to supplement the LEA's core work. Education officers were involved in discussion about the Zone's priorities, which relate appropriately to the EDP priorities, and, reciprocally, the Zone's director is involved in the LEA's planning processes. Mechanisms for sharing routine information between LEA advisers and zone officers are secure and likely to ensure that there is no duplication of work. The LEA's involvement in the Excellence in Cities (EiC) partnership is good. It gives useful support to the partnership, and schools are already beginning to benefit from the close relationship between the LEA's core work and the additional provision emerging from EiC. Again, the organisational links between the work of the advisers and officers and that of the EiC teams are sound and should ensure that developments, such as the EiC learning support units, are linked appropriately to more general LEA strategies, such as its inclusion strategy.

108. The Redcar and Cleveland headteachers' association (RACH) was formed in anticipation of the establishment of the new LEA in 1996. Since then, a strong tradition has developed of detailed discussion between the LEA and RACH about policy development and progress. This has involved RACH not only in evaluating LEA activity, but in developing initiatives itself which the authority has then supported. The structure of the relationship between RACH and the LEA is currently being amended in order to streamline the arrangements for consultation and decision-making. The LEA has been very bold in taking such strong steps towards partnership with schools, and this has been a factor in the establishment of good relationships and firm consensus which are so much a part of the scene in this authority. This is highly commendable.

Management services

Summary and evaluation

109. The management services provided by the council are at least satisfactory, with the exception of corporate ICT and building maintenance, which are unsatisfactory. The other services are well managed and effectively support school improvement. They are successfully traded to schools, and are highly regarded by them.

110. The education department provides a directory of council services to schools, setting out who offers what service, and whether it is centrally funded or offered for sale. There are service plans and detailed service level agreements (SLAs) which clearly define costs and service standards, and offer a range of levels of service. Council services are accountable directly to individual schools and through consultation with RACH. The education department has set up an SLA support unit which manages and monitors catering provision. It intends also to improve the evaluation of other services, and their reporting to schools.

111. The LEA does not actively encourage schools to seek external providers of services, but it does give adequate support to those which choose to procure their own catering, cleaning or other contracts. Given the high levels of delegation many schools are rightly considering developing their own financial, administrative and premises support, but as yet the LEA does not provide them with much information on options and models.

112. The stakeholder group considering the 'Mapping the Market' outsourcing exercise includes schools which are confident that this initiative could reduce costs, and particularly that it would improve the efficiency and reliability of the two currently unsatisfactory services. However, schools also want to maintain the current good integration between the SES and services such as human resources and budget advice because this has proved important to schools causing concern or which are managing declining rolls.

113. **Personnel services** provide good, reliable and sensitive advice to schools in complex casework, and efficiently process basic information. This service contributes to the school monitoring group about schools causing concern, and it works effectively with governors to effect school improvement. There are clear policies and guidance for schools to follow on issues such as sickness monitoring. A graduate and registered teacher programme has built strong links with schools, further education colleges and the graduate teacher scheme.

114. **Budget advice and financial support** are also good, providing basic support and training for school staff and governors. This is building the capacity of schools to integrate resource management and school improvement. The annual budget information provided to schools is very clear, and includes benchmarked cost data. The service monitors school budgets and the authority has never had to withdraw delegation. The service works with schools, where necessary, to develop plans to reduce deficits or utilise surpluses. This process, though, has left a few schools unwisely relying on their surplus to support them through reductions in their roll,

rather than developing a long-term plan. Schools value internal audit by the service. The LEA usefully operates a large purchase scheme that spreads the cost of large one-off purchases over a number of years.

115. One school is successfully piloting the running of its own cheque book account. The LEA has not yet actively promoted this to other schools, even though it should develop their autonomy and minimise the sometimes inefficient process of reconciliation with the council finance systems.

116. **Support for administrative ICT** is variable owing to weaknesses in the co-ordination of support from the corporate ICT service. There are some strengths. The education department now has an information systems strategy which has been the subject of good consultation. This includes the development of an authority-wide pupil database, to integrate the various pupil and performance data. The educational ICT centre provides good support and training for the administrative computer software. The LEA is one of only ten where this year all schools successfully completed the pilot national pupil census. All schools now have at least two administrative networked machines and the finance software will soon be upgraded. All schools have access to the internet through at least one administrative machine.

117. There are, however, significant weaknesses. E-mail has been provided so recently that it is not yet widely used by schools and the LEA. The lack of connection to the administrative networks, noted earlier in this report, is already a problem for secondary schools. Most schools reported problems in liaison with the corporate ICT service about the proposed hardware and networks, and also delays and poor support, mainly due to lack of staff. Schools reported that some positive work was done but the inadequate helpline was particularly frustrating. The council has recognised the weakness in ICT support, and it is a major factor behind the "Mapping the Market" exercise. However, an interim solution is required as the connectivity problems are currently leading to the inefficient use of school resources, and, in particular, limit secondary schools' capacity to utilise performance, assessment and attendance data.

118. **Building maintenance** is provided to schools by the council's housing direct service organisation (DSO). The service is unsatisfactory. It is unreliable. The staff structure is over-bureaucratic. Final charges have sometimes been inconsistent with original quotes and more expensive than alternative providers. There is great delay in invoicing schools for works: in some cases this has taken over a year. However; these weaknesses have been recognised by the council, and following discussions with schools the service is being restructured to improve its quality and responsiveness to schools. Clearer specifications, and a breakdown of costing for individual work, are now provided to schools. Nevertheless, the quality assurance system is still not robust enough, not least to demonstrate improvements to schools. The service is also subject to 'Mapping the Market'.

119. Schools receive facilities management advice. They are increasingly choosing to manage some works themselves with external contractors and are thereby developing confidence and expertise. Even so, all schools except one buy the maintenance SLA at some level. In part this is due to schools being reluctant to

take on more site management responsibility, such as for minor repairs and to develop the caretaker role.

Recommendations

In order to promote better services to schools:

- ensure that consideration is given the needs of schools when making specifications for the 'Mapping the Market' exercise and establishing monitoring systems.

In order to promote school autonomy:

- disseminate information about the potential for schools operating their own cheque book accounts;
- provide more support for developing school-based administrative and bursarial work; and
- stimulate schools to develop their ability to manage their own premises, and to consider various models for developing the caretaker function.

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION

Strategy

120. The LEA has a clear and effective policy for Special Educational Needs, related to the national Code of Practice for SEN. It makes very clear reference to the national agenda for promoting better inclusion of pupils with SEN. The authority has developed early intervention strategies to meet the needs of pupils with SEN. It is making steady progress in matching provision to pupils' needs, but has yet to clarify its long-term vision and strategic direction regarding pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) and those on the autistic spectrum (ASD).

121. The authority is already supporting useful developments in inclusion including outreach work from special schools to support primary and secondary schools, and improvements in the assessment of pupils' needs. For example, a local special school is completing a work-shadowing activity with teachers and teaching assistants, in a local primary school, as a precursor to the development of further inclusive programmes. The authority is currently consulting schools in order to refine its strategy, and has established a project with Newcastle University to investigate the practical implications.

122. SEN provision is given good attention in the LEA's corporate strategy through the drive to raise standards and take account of individual needs. It featured in the EDP. Planning is clear, with reasonable development targets for the short and medium-term. SEN matters are discussed in the joint development planning process. However, some schools and parents are unclear about the authority's future plans for EBD and ASD. The authority has been slow to redress the effect of reorganisation of provision in the boroughs with which it has joint arrangements and, in consequence, has yet to seize the opportunity to develop its own provision to meet needs fully.

123. Review and monitoring of development and service plans are good and provides the authority with a wealth of information of good quality. However, evaluation of progress is less well established and as yet does not inform the long-term strategic vision for the future of SEN provision.

Statutory obligations

124. The authority has a slightly low number of pupils with SEN statements in comparison both to similar authorities and to national figures. The LEA has an effective management system for monitoring pupils with SEN. Its early intervention strategy is having a beneficial effect.

125. An SEN panel manages the statutory assessment process very effectively, ensuring fair and equitable provision for pupils with SEN across the authority. Following extensive consultation, and in liaison with partners, the authority has designed an SEN index to identify the SEN population and predict trends and future incidence.

126. The administration of SEN statements is currently improving and preparations are underway for the better use of ICT. Following consultation and training, annual review procedures have been updated, ensuring efficient response times to all aspects of paperwork. This has also led to greatly improved rewriting of statements and to new statements transferring easily into individual education plans.

127. Monitoring of pupils' progress is broadly sound. Officers monitor and analyse primary schools' SEN registers and have begun to do so in secondary schools. They attend annual reviews for Year 6 transition, 14+ transition, and in instances where the school or the authority identifies a specific need. Educational psychologists also attend most out-of-borough reviews. However, the authority does not yet have any mechanism for using IEP targets to measure pupils' progress, though it has recently issued revised guidelines, which should help to make IEPs more useful tools for evaluation.

128. Seventy-eight per cent of SEN statements are processed within the required time when exceptions are not counted, but only 34 per cent meet the deadline when these are included. This is mostly due to ineffective working procedures between the education department and the health authority even though some initiatives have lately been put in place to address the issue.

129. A parent partnership scheme is in place, with a substantial independent parental support team undergoing accredited training. The part-time LEA officer links with regional provision and is currently developing conciliation and mediation services and links with voluntary and parent groups. The team has experienced high levels of success but the current arrangements are not entirely secure in ensuring that the service is independent from the LEA. The authority has responded well to individual parental concerns, and relatively few cases have gone to the local ombudsman or to SEN tribunals.

School improvement

130. The service provided to schools by the SEN advisory service has been well received since the inception of the authority and has been a significant influence in the development of SEN within the borough.

131. Officers have ensured that the authority participates fully in regional activities and currently leads on one regional inclusion group, which has been effective. Many EiC and EAZ initiatives have had a strong SEN focus. Other university-linked teacher research projects have focused on pupils with moderate learning difficulties, and on the annual review process. The authority has also supported schools in the development of an assessment package for SEN.

132. The support services and the school improvement team provide good training opportunities for schools. In addition, the LEA supports a range of staff in gaining access to accredited courses aligned to the National Standards and to DfES guidance.

133. The LEA gives good support to networks of Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators, special school headteachers, teachers in schools with support bases, SEN cluster groups and sensory consortia.

134. Ninety per cent of schools buy support from the learning and behaviour support services. Schools particularly welcome these services' involvement in the literacy and numeracy strategies, and in introducing assessment packages to support identification of pupils with SEN. However, the work of the behaviour support service, the education otherwise than at school service and the pupil inclusion outreach team is not yet cohesive in the support given to pupils with EBD in secondary schools.

135. Schools value the work of the educational psychology service, particularly for its proactive emphasis. The area drop-in centres are very effective ways of ensuring that the service is integrated into the community and is accessible to all, including parents. Quality assurance framework and school evaluations are systematically used to improve practice. The team has a balanced approach to intervention work, statutory work and training.

136. The sensory services are provided regionally by another authority. They are very well received by schools and can clearly demonstrate the effect they have in raising standards and addressing pupils' needs. However, the LEA does not have a sufficiently clear long-term strategy which recognises the growing incidence of complex medical disabilities in pre-school children.

Value for money

137. The funding for SEN provision is well managed and effective. Centrally retained SEN funding is lower than similar authorities, but similar when the £1 million delegated to mainstream school units is included. No other funding for SEN statements is delegated. The focus of spending on early intervention appears to be successful, as the proportion of the SEN budget spent on pupils with statements is 57 per cent, lower than any similar authorities or the national average of 69 per cent. Spending on SEN placements in the independent sector is only a third of that made by similar authorities. However, there is evidence of a lack of appropriate provision for pupils with EBD.

138. Schools understand and are happy with the funding mechanisms for SEN, and the additional EiC funding for inclusive practice. The LEA's index provides a sound system for ensuring consistency in the identification of pupils with SEN and is thus a useful step in ensuring transparency in the use of funding. Schools have welcomed the delegation of funding for support work and manage this funding effectively. Secondary schools are managing pupil retention grant funding for EBD pupils successfully. The LEA has taken some useful steps to address the funding issues concerning the fluid population within the resource bases or served by outreach activities, but this has not yet been completely formalised.

139. The LEA has not yet audited the overall use of SEN funding and evaluated this against the information contained in the pupil index. Its support for SEN has improved as a result of the authority's willingness to make considered steps forward.

It is also making a valuable contribution to schools' abilities to evaluate their own effectiveness in this provision. This, if it is linked to better evaluation by the LEA of its own provision, is likely to lead to further improvement.

Recommendations

In order to establish a more comprehensive strategy for SEN:

- develop a long term strategy for the provision of support for pupils with EBD or those on the autistic spectrum.

In order to meet the needs of pupils with SEN more promptly:

- agree protocols with the health authority to ensure that statutory assessment of pupils with SEN is more rapid.

In order to ensure that improvements in SEN provision continue:

- establish a better system for auditing and evaluating the use of SEN funding.

SECTION 5: ACCESS

The Supply of school places

140. The council has so far removed 156 nursery places, 1,300 primary places, and 1,000 secondary places as the population has declined. It has successfully reduced all infant class sizes to a maximum of 30. These are important achievements. There is also good liaison with the dioceses and neighbouring authorities on the provision of places. However, the council has not yet developed an overall, comprehensive strategy or clear plans for further action, despite the fact that the school population will continue to decline by 20 per cent in the next ten years, among the highest rates of reduction nationally. Its support for one current reorganisation has been unsatisfactory.

141. The school organisation plan clearly identifies the future problems. There are currently 10 per cent surplus places in the primary phase, and 12 per cent in secondary. The plan concludes that there will be a need to closely monitor or remove surplus places in most areas by 2005, when primary surplus places will have risen to 22 per cent. However, it will be a particularly complex challenge to continue to improve provision as rolls fall, given the relatively small total pupil numbers and the different impact of demographic change in the rural and inner city areas. The education department's service plan identifies the need for planning work, but the significance of the issues is not highlighted by any mention in the LEA strategic plan, nor in the draft borough strategic plan. Whereas there is an 'empty homes policy' initiative in the latter plan, there is no similar plan for the education service. The council has not yet engaged in consultation with schools and the wider community about the broad implications of the population decline. There has been insufficient debate about the more important educational issues arising from declining rolls. These include the implications for schools that are reducing in size of managing the curriculum and class organisation, and of recruiting and retaining staff, and the funding implications for the LEA.

142. The council has implemented a number of reorganisations in the primary phase. Following an area review of secondary provision it has decided to replace three secondary schools with rolls of 283, 440, and 460 respectively with a new three-site school, due to open in September 2001. This decision gave priority to maintaining local provision. However, the three sites are several miles apart, and rolls are likely to fall further. Despite this, the LEA has promised that a full curriculum at Key Stage 3 will be provided on each site. There have already been difficulties in constructing a timetable. The new school is going to be very expensive to run, as well as difficult to manage, in effect requiring a subsidy of £368,000 in the first year. The council's decision did not give sufficient priority to ensuring long term sustainability and the provision of a good quality of education. The LEA underestimated these difficulties and its support for the new school has not proved fully effective.

143. There is regional collaboration about long-term special needs provision. However, this LEA has had to respond to very challenging circumstances concerning regional EBD reorganisation, which do not make long-term planning simple. It has

considered the possibility of some provision by an alternative provider, and still hopes to be involved in regional arrangements, but the problem is not yet solved. This is particularly important given that some pupils are currently inappropriately placed in a pupil referral unit.

Admissions

144. Admissions functions are discharged satisfactorily by a well-managed service. Clear information is provided for parents, and their opinions are sought in regular reviews.

145. Admissions criteria are based on defined admissions zones for schools, and this has proved satisfactory as there is a culture of loyalty to local schools and 97 per cent of applicants obtained their first preference of school last year. The LEA is sensibly keeping the admissions zones under review as some are being more affected than others by demographic changes and surplus places are accumulating. This is leading to some flexibility as increasing numbers of secondary admissions, now 19.4 per cent, are from outside the relevant admission zone.

146. The LEA convenes an admissions forum and liases with neighbouring LEAs. The relatively few appeals are processed efficiently. The LEA aims to broker the transfer of pupils between schools, as speedily as possible. Links have been established with the national asylum seekers support service and the council's housing department to support the smooth admission of the increasing numbers of asylum seekers to their local schools.

Asset management

147. The strategic education asset management service is lean and efficient. It prepares and monitors capital programme bids and manages the asset management plan. It advises schools on their property responsibilities, and liases with RACH. There are good links with school improvement and community initiatives.

148. The asset management plan has proved a strong basis for the prioritisation of capital needs and for making successful bids for external funding, and schools' experience of the process was relatively successful. All schools have received a condition survey and are becoming better at using this information to plan improvements which will meet property needs and educational objectives. The LEA team provides sound technical guidance, and advice on the management of contracts and works.

149. The LEA has been successful with bids for money from a wide range of funding streams to improve school facilities. It has managed large capital projects well. A secondary school is being rebuilt in an innovative partnership arrangement with a contractor, and at the time of the inspection this impressive project was almost complete on time and to budget. Four primary schools are due to benefit from 'Space for Sports and Arts' projects.

Provision of education otherwise than at school

150. Arrangements for the teaching of pupils who are educated otherwise than at school (EOTAS) are good. The LEA fulfils all its statutory obligations and has a clear strategy that promotes good standards and expectations. It provides realistic academic and social opportunities for pupils to make progress and to be re-integrated into school, college or work. More than half of all excluded pupils attend some form of educational provision for at least 20 hours a week and pupils attending the pupil referral unit (PRU) receive more than 25 hours of educational provision a week. All pupils provided for by the service follow some form of award-bearing courses. The EOTAS service successfully integrates over three-quarters of excluded pupils into some form of full-time educational provision, using a range of services and involving a number of partners who work with older pupils. The education welfare service (EUS) provides effective links between excluding schools and the EOTAS service, and the LEA maintains increasingly detailed profiles on the support provided for, and the progress made by each pupil in each category for which it is responsible.

151. The EOTAS service also manages successful initiatives in the primary sector. It has set up a nurture group which starts with Year 1 pupils and is aimed at supporting those who lack confidence and social skills. It manages a pupil support unit that is based in one primary school but serves a cluster, catering for the needs of pupils at Key Stages 1 and 2 who are facing exclusion from school. Attendance is part time and these pupils are supported also in their own schools. This initiative is to be extended into other areas, under the management of the clusters themselves. Places are limited however, and there is some concern amongst schools that some pupils will attend for a long time and thereby reduce the availability of places further.

152. The main PRU is also very effective in its work with excluded pupils and those that have special difficulties. It is led with vision and provides a very good service. Its policy is to insist rigorously on good attendance, good behaviour and achievement within an academic or alternative curriculum. It is able to provide the full curriculum for secondary pupils. However, places at the unit are limited and, increasingly, it is admitting a greater number of pupils with EBD problems.

153. Referral systems are well known to schools and exclusions are handled well by the service, in both primary and secondary phases. Only in rare and exceptional circumstances do pupils have to wait more than three weeks after exclusion for an alternative placement. Often placement is found within one or two days. The service has also established an effective tracking system for ex-pupils who have received its support in the past. Data is beginning to build up about their progress in further education and training and in their lives in work and society. This serves a useful purpose in that it helps the service with evaluation of its effectiveness and, subsequently, in improving provision.

154. Hospital tuition is managed by another LEA. Hospital educational provision is good and the service works effectively with schools to ensure that a hospitalised pupil receives its full curriculum entitlement and that curriculum continuity is maintained with that being provided in school. Individual tuition is provided by EOTAS, in the home or at a centre, for pupils whose behaviour and attitude preclude

their attendance at school or the PRU. However, there are a number of pupils whose behaviour and reluctance to engage with education make it difficult to deliver home tuition. Nevertheless, owing to limited resources, some pupils who are allocated home tuition receive only five hours support a week, which is inadequate.

155. Effective working partnerships have been set up with the social services department, health authority, youth offenders team and the educational psychology service amongst others. For example, the service now has a seconded health worker, paid for by the Health Action Zone, who, with EOTAS staff has conducted a 'Profile of Health Needs' survey amongst the pupils looked after by the service. This is a pilot project that covers a wide range of problems, which have resulted in pupils being placed in the care of the service. The outcome is an impressive piece of analytical work, which has been circulated to a wide range of agencies that work in partnership with EOTAS. The EOTAS service is very aware of Best Value criteria and attempts to adhere to them in its development and delivery.

Attendance

156. Support for attendance is satisfactory overall, though there is variation in attendance rates between schools. Expenditure on the EWS is close to the average for unitary authorities, and the service provides satisfactory value for money.

157. Attendance in both primary and secondary schools is broadly in line with the national averages and to those for similar LEAs, and improving at a faster rate. Unauthorised absence in primary schools is less than half the national rate and the EDP target set for 2002 was achieved ahead of time. In secondary schools the rate of unauthorised absence is close to the national average, and is on track to achieve the 2002 target. Schools have individual attendance targets.

158. The EWS has recently been restructured. Education social workers (ESWs) are allocated to schools differentially according to the school's need, though several heads are unclear about the basis of the allocation. The service has introduced a performance contract with each school to specify what the EWS will provide, and provides the school with an annual report of work done. However, the reports are entirely quantitative and contain no evaluation of impact. In addition, the service has begun to target areas for joint projects with the police to spot check pupils absenting themselves from schools. A detailed and helpful set of procedure documents has been introduced, but there is no overall policy statement setting out the LEA's strategies for improving attendance. The LEA uses its legal powers when it is considered that these are likely to lead to improvement, and is embarking on using educational supervision orders in some instances. To date one school attendance order has been issued.

159. These changes represent significant improvement, and most schools rated support for attendance as satisfactory or good. A number of schools have supplemented the EWS support, chiefly by employing attendance assistants to contact parents as early as possible when pupils are absent without explanation. However, the distinction between the responsibilities of the attendance assistants and those of the ESW is not always clear.

Behaviour support

160. The LEA meets fully all its statutory requirements. Overall, it gives satisfactory support in promoting good behaviour, and, together with good work from schools, has achieved success in reducing the number of exclusions. The percentage of pupils permanently excluded from primary schools is below the national average. The proportion excluded from secondary schools is broadly in line with the national figure. Permanent exclusions from special schools are well below with the national percentage. The percentages of permanent and fixed term exclusions have reduced over the last year. The LEA has set further challenging targets in all areas to be achieved by 2003 and it is on line to achieve these targets.

161. The current behaviour support plan (BSP) is generally satisfactory, making a clear commitment to the principles of inclusion and multi-agency working, and outlining the provision available to schools. Expectations of schools are made explicit and the need to work with agencies and parents are emphasised appropriately. Early intervention and preventative strategies make clear where the service is required to focus. The BSP is currently being revised and improved. In addition to refining the strategies, the plan takes account of the need to improve the provision for EBD pupils which is currently causing problems for some schools and is an area of weakness. The draft plan has appropriate priorities and targets, and well-defined success criteria.

162. The schools' survey and discussions with headteachers and governors show that many schools believe that the quality of the LEA's behaviour support service (BSS) is good, although there are general concerns about provision for EBD pupils. The delegated budget to schools has had a positive effect on the BSS. The service has become more streamlined, is very supportive and quick to respond. The delegated budget has enabled schools to buy from the BSS, or other sources, more specialised support that matches their needs well.

163. Most schools have experienced a marked improvement in the BSS over the past two years as its restructuring has a positive effect. There are good examples of inter-agency working in the LEA's strategies to improve behaviour. The BSS and the learning support service (LSS) share the same base and work well together in their support of schools. This is an efficient use of the LEA's resources. The PRU provides an outreach service to other schools or provides in-service training for mainstream teachers in behaviour management skills. This is a further example of good practice within the LEA. There are, nevertheless, still some gaps in provision for EBD pupils, as noted elsewhere in this report. The placement of these pupils in shared out-of-borough provision is sometimes problematical because of limited availability of places.

Health, safety, welfare, child protection

164. The LEA carries out its statutory responsibilities in this area appropriately and gives a high priority to the safety, welfare and protection of children. It plays an active role in protecting children from significant harm. It has clear policies on all these aspects, and schools are given good, comprehensive guidance on policy and procedures. Governors are given guidance on their statutory responsibilities. The

LEA carries out inspections of school premises regularly and school co-ordinators for health and safety have a clear understanding of their responsibilities. The LEA also provides schools with clear advice on dealing with day-to-day matters and major incidents, for example, bomb warnings. Safety problems, which are reported by schools, are carefully analysed and, for the most part, promptly attended to.

165. All newly appointed staff, including teachers and ancillary workers, receive a two-hour training session and NQTs have a half-day training course in child protection as part of their induction package. The LEA provides a range of good quality in-service courses for child protection co-ordinators, sometimes in conjunction with a range of other agencies such as the police, social services, the Health Authority and Barnado's. The child protection service is very good in its support of pupils who have suffered some form of trauma, abuse, physical injury or neglect. The education department's specialist child protection officer, the social services department and EWS have a close working relationship with schools in matters of child protection. This ensures a speedy response when intervention is required. Inter-agency working is a strong feature of the LEA's provision in this area.

Children in public care

166. The council has recently given significant attention to improving its approach to the education of children in its care. This is timely, as the standards of attainment of these children are currently low and they are being excluded from school more often than their peers. Elected members are involved in a working party developing new strategies, one has designated oversight of this work, and several have been involved in visiting residential homes and foster homes. The council has now created a new integrated team of officers from the education and social services departments with responsibility for children in public care, and is exploring ways of making this a broader, multi-agency group. These are sound developments.

167. A good start has been made on establishing the basis for improved support to this group of children. The new officer team has ensured that all schools have a designated teacher for this area of work, and many of them have now attended a useful awareness raising session. Schools are currently being informed formally by the team if any children on their roll are in public care, whereas previously they sometimes found out more incidentally. However, three schools visited during the inspection were still unaware that one pupil on their roll was in public care. Most residential homes now have a nominated education worker, and action is in hand to boost foster carers' capacity to give children educational support. The process of preparing a personal education plan for each child is now in train, and this will lead to a meeting to plan and review provision for each one. The educational psychology service will evaluate the progress of all these pupils during each Key Stage, and the in-school support services are taking a more prominent monitoring role.

168. A new departmental database will now allow the team to monitor these pupils efficiently, including those who are educated out of the borough. The social services department now also has a database which will provide a comprehensive record of the children's educational achievement.

Ethnic minority children

169. The LEA's support for pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds, including Travellers and asylum seekers, is satisfactory overall. The service is working with a high degree of commitment to improve the quality of provision in all the areas for which it has a responsibility, and inclusion of all pupils is its highest priority. Grant funding is delegated to schools but almost all use it to buy the services of the LEA's specialist team, in which schools have great confidence.

170. Although the LEA does not have a large number of pupils from minority ethnic groups, it does have a well-established multi-cultural education specialist support team, which is based at the school with the largest ethnic minority population in the borough but which also provides peripatetic support to other schools. The team achieves considerable success with pupils in Key Stages 1 and 2 for whom English is an additional language (EAL) by raising their competency in using English to the extent that by the end of the Key Stage 2 most are achieving as well as their peers. The National Curriculum attainment of minority ethnic pupils are recorded and analysed at the end of each key stage, as are their GCSE results. The results of these analyses are fed back to schools. This has resulted in more effective tracking systems being developed in schools with ethnic minority pupil populations and more focused targets being set for them. A database has been established recently so that the LEA may monitor progress of these pupils, more closely over time. Detailed records are kept also of the support given to these pupils. The focus of the service tends to be on EAL in the primary sector but individual support is made available in the secondary sector when needed. In addition, the service provides in-service training for mainstream teachers to enable them to deliver the curriculum more effectively to bilingual pupils.

171. The team is very active in other areas that concern ethnic minority pupils. It continues to provide in-service courses in primary and secondary schools for teachers and classroom assistants and has supported the LEA's initiatives in literacy and numeracy by working alongside staff in schools with large ethnic minority populations.

172. Provision for Travellers' children is shared within a consortium of LEAs and based out-of-borough. Nevertheless, it is able to make a speedy response when these pupils arrive in a school. Schools that make use of the service find it to be of good quality.

173. The arrival of asylum seekers is stretching the resources of the service team. The population of asylum seeker children is very mobile. In just over a year the numbers in this group at one time have risen from four to 83, and 150 have passed through the records of the service in that time. The LEA's service is attempting, successfully, to be pro-active under these circumstances and coping well with a very fluid situation. As a consequence, the service has expanded both in numbers of personnel and in its range of activities. It continues to provide professional development courses for schools. The council is planning a Refugee Week to raise awareness in the community of the needs of these groups. Guidance documentation and a resource pack have been circulated to schools.

174. The service is working with a high degree of commitment to improve the quality of provision in all the areas for which it has a responsibility, and inclusion of all pupils is its highest priority.

Gifted and talented children

175. The LEA provides good support for secondary schools in working with gifted and talented pupils. Work in primary schools is less systematic but is beginning to gather momentum.

176. The authority has provided a useful collection of suggested activities and programmes for extension of the work in core subjects with more able pupils in primary schools. As yet this has not had a major overall impact, though some schools have recently begun to use the programmes. Last year two successful summer schools were held and this year three are planned.

177. Chiefly through the EiC partnership, work in secondary schools has developed at a faster rate, although there is still variation between schools. A strand co-ordinator provides an overall lead, and is supported by four cluster co-ordinators, each allocated time to liaise with three or four schools. Each school also has its own co-ordinator, with some dedicated time. Cluster co-ordinators are about to complete training with a nationally recognised provider, and it is planned that school co-ordinators will follow them in this. In one Beacon school, work with gifted and talented pupils has grown over several years and the partnership has wisely used this as a springboard for developments throughout the authority.

178. The authority has issued a useful set of guidance on curriculum enrichment and extension activities. This has been influential in encouraging a wide range of strategies across the schools. Lunch time and after school sessions enable additional subjects to be taken, some schools have added courses specifically for able pupils to the range of options, clusters are organising activities to develop study skills, some are making use of the university mentor scheme and one is providing additional Saturday classes. Provision for those with specific talents is less well developed, though links are being developed between schools and local football clubs. There are plans to establish an Applied Maths Centre in partnership with a higher education institution. Schools are expected to set targets for these pupils, particularly to enhance the proportion gaining three or more A* or A grades at GCSE, though as yet there is no equivalent for younger pupils. There is also an expectation that a proportion of the identified pupils will enter GCSE a year early in some subjects, although not all schools are convinced of the value of this.

179. This development is still at an early stage, and the partnership is wisely encouraging each school to explore those strategies that fit its circumstances best. It is planned that an evaluation of the impact of each strategy will enable the identification of the most successful approaches so that all can benefit from others' experience.

Social exclusion

180. The LEA has a very comprehensive policy and guidelines regarding equality of opportunity and social inclusion and is giving at least satisfactory support to schools and pupils. Each of the service arms has a clearly defined and practical approach to promoting the policy. Schools generally express satisfaction with all areas of provision associated with inclusion. The authority has a strong commitment to increasing involvement in education by vulnerable groups of pupils, and has much work in progress that is likely to lead to greater inclusion. These include the establishment of better behaviour support systems; the efforts to further improve school attendance and the improved monitoring of the performance of different groups of pupils taking account of age, gender, ethnicity and ability. Service provision is well planned and generally expert. Good use is made of links between council functions and with external partners. The authority's work on social inclusion has improved significantly in the recent past. It is well conceived and is based on the sound use of data and appropriate action planning. The capacity of the LEA to make further improvement in this area is good.

181. The council is committed to protecting cultural diversity and to opposing racism. Very clear directives are given to schools about racist behaviour and they are required to produce their own policy response. The LEA guidelines take account of harassment in all its forms and are firmly linked to the recommendations contained in the Macpherson Report. The council is providing extensive training on responding to racism. The multi-cultural education and community development support teams make strong contributions to the authority's work in this area. There has been more multi-agency working recently to promote racial harmony in the light of the increasing number of asylum-seekers. These strategies appear to be working well.

Recommendations

In order to establish a borough strategy for managing falling rolls:

- after consultation with schools and other stakeholders, develop a comprehensive strategy for school improvement during a period of falling rolls; this should:
 - include analysis of the educational issues facing small schools;
 - include consideration of the implications for the school funding formula;
 - establish principles for balancing community interests and educational interests;
 - link school improvement strategy and asset management strategy;
 - establish a timetable for action;
 - ensure that this strategy is clearly communicated to schools and the wider community; and
 - ensure that this strategy is prioritised within the borough strategic plan.

In order to improve provision for pupils who have no school place:

- ensure that a disproportionate number of pupils with EBD are not placed in the PRU; and
- as soon as possible, increase the time entitlement of all pupils receiving home tuition provision.

In order to improve school attendance:

- prepare a coherent overall strategic policy on attendance support setting out clearly the full range of activities and initiatives employed, and specifying the respective responsibilities of the LEA and of individual schools; and
- evaluate the impact of the attendance strategies currently used and in future focus resourcing accordingly.

In order to further improve support to schools for gifted and talented pupils:

- develop strategies for target-setting for younger pupils, particularly at the end of key stages.

APPENDIX 1: RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve monitoring and evaluation:

- ensure that, where possible, future educational plans have success criteria defined in terms of pupils' achievement; and
- establish a mechanism for regular review by elected members of the performance of the education department

In order to simplify planning systems:

- ensure that the next Education Development Plan is regularly updated to take account of changing needs and to take account of action deriving from future LEA strategic plans.

In order to ensure fair distribution of funding:

- monitor the school funding formula in the light of any new additional funding gained from external funding streams to ensure that the overall distribution represents the council's policy and meets schools' varied needs.

In order to promote school autonomy:

- develop a more differentiated programme of performance reviews in line with the principles outlined in the Code of Practice for LEA-school relations; and
- ensure that the attendance of attached advisers at governing body meetings is in proportion to schools' needs.

In order to ensure a transparent system of support for schools with weaknesses:

- give more information to all schools about the system and criteria for categorising schools causing concern and those needing close monitoring; and
- ensure that procedures for informing headteachers and governors of the LEA's concerns follow a formal procedure.

In order to improve support to schools in the use of ICT in the curriculum:

- implement a system of curriculum support to schools which is differentiated according to their needs; and
- take urgent action to ensure that every school has broad band access to the internet and to an LEA intranet.

In order to promote better services to schools:

- ensure that consideration is given the needs of schools when making specifications for the 'Mapping the Market' exercise and establishing monitoring systems.

In order to promote school autonomy:

- disseminate information about the potential for schools operating cheque book accounts;
- provide more support for developing school-based administrative and bursarial work; and

- stimulate schools to develop their premises management capacity, and consider various models for developing the caretaker function.

In order to establish a more comprehensive strategy for SEN:

- develop a long term strategy for the provision of support for pupils with EBD or those on the autistic spectrum.

In order to meet the needs of pupils with SEN more promptly:

- agree protocols with the health authority to ensure that statutory assessment of pupils with SEN is more rapid.

In order to ensure that improvements in SEN provision continue:

- establish a better system for auditing and evaluating the use of SEN funding.

In order to establish a borough strategy for managing falling rolls:

- after consultation with schools and other stakeholders, develop a comprehensive strategy for school improvement during a period of falling rolls; this should:
 - include analysis of the educational issues facing small schools;
 - include consideration of the implications for the school funding formula;
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 - establish a timetable for action;
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- prepare a coherent overall strategic policy on attendance support setting out clearly the full range of activities and initiatives employed, and specifying the respective responsibilities of the LEA and of individual schools; and
- evaluate the impact of the attendance strategies currently used and in future focus resourcing accordingly.

In order to further improve support to schools for gifted and talented pupils:

- develop strategies for target-setting for younger pupils, particularly at the end of key stages.

APPENDIX 2

The Best Value Review of the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership.

1. The Early Years Childcare Development Plan was formed in 1998. It is now securely established and makes an important contribution to improving the quality of provision. Aims and objectives are set out clearly in its plan, which is carefully matched with the Education Development Plan, complements other relevant local authority plans, and provides a clear indication of how its outcomes will contribute to the achievement of national and local strategic objectives. Participating services and agencies provided examples of how the partnership had contributed to more coherent planning. Private sector members report that they have benefited through more ready access to information and guidance, to help with grant applications and through access to training. LEA policy support for the partnership has throughout been strong, and resources support, originally somewhat sparing, has recently been increased as one of the outcomes of the Best Value review. The EYDCP can demonstrate many achievements to date, such as support for the new childminder initiative; increased childcare provision in the private sector; and the development of wrap-around provision in some private sector play groups. As one outcome of the Best Value review, it has recently embarked on work with local employers (including the council) to consider how working conditions and timings can be more supportive of family life. It is a successful partnership, well supported by the LEA, and showing a determination to develop and improve its work.

2. Although the duty of Best Value does not apply directly to EYDCPs, the high priority given by the LEA to improving early years and childcare provision led to this being selected as the first educational Best Value review. The timing of the review came at the right time for the development of the partnership. Although some aspects of the best value disciplines have been difficult to apply, the outcomes of the review are helping to stimulate and guide further developments and improvements. Groups of elected members scrutinised each stage of the review, and this practice raised some important questions about the impact of EYDCP plans on other corporate plans. Moreover, through conducting the process at an early stage, much has been learned about the principles and operation of Best Value reviews that can inform future practice.

3. Carefully planned consultation was undertaken with partnership members, with officers of the borough council, with a range of independent providers of childcare services and with service users – both parents and children. A wide variety of means was used, including questionnaires, discussions both formal and informal with groups and individuals, and invitation of written responses. There was a clear focus on obtaining views on current strengths and weakness of the partnership, and on clarifying users' expectations and hopes. Response to the consultation was less extensive than it might have been, but it provided the partnership with useful guidance about aspects needing to be improved that are embedded in the post review action plan.

4. The principles of the National Childcare Strategy were used to challenge current practice. This included an evaluation of the quality of early education and childcare services, their affordability to different groups of users, the extent to which diversity of provision enables appropriate choice, and geographical accessibility or provision in different parts of the authority. The application of the challenge principle usefully complemented and extended the outcomes of consultation and influenced the review action plan usefully.

5. The absence of national data on comparable activity and costs inhibited the rigorous application of comparison and competition. The partnership's development plan, however, includes its own performance indicators, and comparison of real achievement with these was undertaken as part of the review. Attempts to obtain national data to serve as benchmarks were not successful, although use was made of the review of partnerships commissioned in 1999 by the Department for Education and Skills. A regional survey of officer support for EYDCPs in Teeside led to an increase of support staff by the LEA, and other regional data was collected that enabled comparisons of expenditure and provision. However, the use made of this was limited.

6. The principle of competition proved particularly difficult to apply, and was limited to an examination of alternative possibilities for the procurement of some services. A joint arrangement with a neighbouring authority already existed for registration and inspection services. An alternative provider was, however, chosen in preference to developing an new in-house information service and tenders are being invited for training and planning contracts. Through the encouragement of and support for the development of additional private sector childcare settings, the partnership is making sustained efforts to develop the market.

7. In spite of difficulties, the review group, the composition of which was well chosen to represent a wide range of interests, made every effort to apply Best Value principles to the work of the partnership and several important lessons have been learned. In the absence of national data, it has not been possible to define the characteristics of the top 25 per cent of partnerships and compare that of Redcar and Cleveland with these. Nevertheless, the resulting action plan contains a number of strategies to improve and extend the service, and the partnership's aims, already clear in its plan, have been refined and the order of priority sharpened. The conduct of the review has strengthened the partnership and has been a significant factor in driving its further improvement. In summary, this is a good partnership, which is likely to improve as a result of the Best Value review.

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