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APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection was carried out by OFSTED in conjunction with the Audit Commission under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The inspection used the *Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities* which focuses on the effectiveness of local education authority (LEA) work to support school improvement.
2. The inspection was partly based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA, on school inspection information and audit reports, on documentation and discussions with LEA members, staff in the Education Department and in other Council departments and representatives of the LEA's partners. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on aspects of the LEA's work was circulated to 108 schools. The response rate was 83%.
3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to two nursery, one infant, three first, six primary, one middle, four secondary, four upper and three special schools. The visits tested the views of governors, headteachers and other staff on the key aspects of the LEA's strategy. The visits also considered whether the support which is provided by the LEA contributes, where appropriate, to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in the school, and provides value for money.

COMMENTARY

4. Oxfordshire LEA serves a population which is relatively advantaged compared with many areas of the country. Overall, pupils' attainment in key stage tests and GCSE are at or above national averages but below those of similar authorities. A wide disparity exists between the performance of schools even when the socio-economic variations between the areas served by them are taken into account. The best schools achieve results that compare with the most successful schools elsewhere, but in too many there is substantial under-achievement.

5. A number of historic factors have influenced this picture. For several years the LEA has funded education below the level indicated by central government according to its Standard Spending Assessment (SSA). Some schools see this as a significant factor in explaining poor results. The Council has been "hung" for nearly 15 years with no political party being in overall control. This adversely influences aspects of the decision making process and has, until recently, prevented a clear County-wide steer for education and decisive action in relation to national priority areas. In the past, schools have been slow to engage with the national agenda, even to the point of resistance, for example to the national testing regime.

6. Fortunately for the pupils and parents in Oxfordshire, the inspection findings identify recent changes in the LEA which have begun to impact on the expectations schools have of themselves and their pupils. Over the course of the last two years most of the historic factors identified above have been substantially addressed. There have also been changes to the structure of the education department, which now provides a clear strategic direction in relation to school improvement.

7. The LEA is very lean and well run. It has gone further than most in delegating funding to schools. At the same time, its capacity to support school improvement has grown. It has more strengths than weaknesses. The strengths pay testimony to improvements in the structure of LEA services and the strategies now being employed to improve the standards and quality of schools. The weaknesses are few but they are vitally important, lying as they do at the root of the LEA's aspirations to raise attainment, and they will need the full commitment of the schools and Members, as well as officers, to remedy.

8. The following functions are not adequately exercised:-

- consistent challenge to all schools to maximise attainment; including the setting of demanding targets;
- oversight of school improvement by Members;
- support to schools in special measures or with serious weaknesses.

9. The following functions are performed satisfactorily, or more often well, and they generally reflect good value for money:-

- clear strategic direction and policy advice from senior officers and an improving partnership with schools;

- provision of suitable, effective services with good planning and performance management. Examples include governor support, the educational psychology service, the education social work service and behaviour support services;
- support for school development planning and self evaluation;
- support to promote access;
- support for the national literacy and numeracy strategies.

10. The LEA has recognised that the most pressing issue for Oxfordshire is the under-performance of many of its schools and it has, appropriately, made the raising of attainment central to its planning and resource allocation. Oxfordshire LEA provides a range of high quality, self-critical support services, which have a clear focus on school improvement and which are generally well targeted. The main and crucial exception to this is the unacceptable variation in the effectiveness with which link officers and advisers challenge schools to improve. This is still too variable to prevent some schools from coasting and others from establishing targets that are insufficiently demanding. Members also have a greater part to play in providing an unequivocal endorsement of the need for many schools, especially those which do not perform as well as similar schools, to improve.

11. The view of the inspection team is that, overall, this LEA has made much needed progress and it is providing cost effective, and often good quality, support to schools. The important caveat, however, is that too many Oxfordshire schools are still coasting and pupil performance overall is not as good as it should be. Evidence of more rapid and sustained improvement in standards of attainment will be needed before it is possible to say that Oxfordshire LEA is fully effective. However, it undoubtedly has the capacity to make further progress and is well fitted to address the recommendations contained in this report.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

12. Oxfordshire LEA serves a relatively affluent population. The proportions of pupils from homes where adults have higher education qualifications and/or belong to social classes 1 and 2 are above average for the country as a whole. The proportion of pupils who are eligible for free school meals is below average, as is that for pupils in primary schools who have statements of special educational need. In secondary schools there is a similar proportion of pupils with statements of special educational need to other LEAs. The proportion of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds is in line with that for similar LEAs but it is much higher in some areas such as Banbury and Oxford City than in other parts of the County. Unemployment in Oxfordshire in March 1998 was 1.8% compared to the South-East average of 3% and the national average of 5%.

13. Schools within Oxford City are organised into three tiers with transfer from First to Middle school at 9 and from middle school to Upper school at 13. The organisation of these schools is currently subject to review. In the rest of the LEA there is a Primary/Secondary system with transfer to secondary school at age 11. The number of each type of school is shown in the table below:

| | |
|--|-----|
| Nursery schools (including 7 attached to Primary or First Schools) | 15 |
| First and Infant schools with nursery classes | 17 |
| First and Infant schools without nursery classes | 17 |
| Junior schools | 6 |
| Junior and Infant schools with nursery classes | 34 |
| Junior and Infant schools without nursery classes | 160 |
| Middle schools | 10 |
| Secondary schools (11-16) | 8 |
| Secondary schools (11-18) | 21 |
| Upper schools (13-18) | 6 |
| Special schools (including hospital schools) | 14 |
| Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) | 6 |

14. These schools are spread across a wide and varied geographical area including sparse rural communities and rapidly growing County towns. Almost 60% of the schools in the primary sector are voluntary schools. Overall, the number of pupils in LEA schools between the ages of 5 and 11 years is approximately 43,300 and there are 30,300 pupils aged from 11 to 16 years. The LEA estimates that 13% of the school age population is educated in independent schools compared with seven percent nationally.

Performance

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

- Oxfordshire's baseline assessment data shows that pupils' attainment on entry to primary schools is above average. However, pupils start in mainstream schooling as rising fives, slightly older than the age of admission in many LEAs.
- In the 1998 tests Oxfordshire's performance was generally at or above national averages but below that for similar LEAs at Key Stages 1, 2, and 3 in both English and mathematics. Attainment in GCSE was also above national figures but below that for similar LEAs. Complete comparative figures for the 1999 tests are not yet available, but at Key Stage 2 (KS2) standards are rising in Oxfordshire schools faster than those in similar authorities. Early indications are that improvement at GCSE is less pronounced and, in particular, the differences in attainment between schools in similar contexts within Oxfordshire remain too great.
- The attainment of boys in literacy is lower than that of girls at each of the Key Stages but the gap is wider than that nationally at Key Stage 3 (KS3).
- OFSTED reports show that the quality of teaching in primary schools is broadly in line with national figures but worse than that in similar LEAs; that in secondary schools is slightly higher than in similar LEAs and better than that found nationally. The proportion of primary schools requiring some or much improvement is higher than the national figures and those for similar LEAs. The proportion of secondary schools requiring some or much improvement is broadly in line with similar LEAs and considerably lower than the national figures.
- Currently eight of Oxfordshire's schools require special measures, a further 14 have been judged to have serious weaknesses and 26 schools have been identified as a cause for concern to the authority.
- In both primary and secondary schools attendance is higher than the national average and slightly below that in similar LEAs.
- The proportion of pupils permanently excluded from primary schools and from secondary schools is lower than the proportion for similar LEAs and the national average.

Funding

16. Overall, Oxfordshire has funded education below the SSA level for the last three years. It has spent above SSA on nursery and on post-16 education, but below SSA on primary and secondary education.

17. There is clear evidence that the lower overall level of funding compared to similar LEAs is constraining improvement in service delivery in some central services such as financial support and ICT. The impact is also discernible in schools, for example in terms of the low level of investment in buildings and ICT, increasing class-sizes outside Key Stage 1 (KS1) and the comparatively high teaching commitment of headteachers of small primary schools. Over half of the schools visited reported an increasing need to develop voluntary fund raising or other help

from parents and the local community to sustain and improve their work. The LEA has recognised this and is committed to funding at least at SSA level from next year.

| | 1997-98 | 1998-99 | 1999-2000 |
|--------------------|---------|---------|-----------|
| £000 Budget | 190,165 | 202,833 | 215,250 |
| £000 Education SSA | 194,549 | 207,934 | 217,438 |
| Budget as % of SSA | 97% | 97% | 99% |

18. Oxfordshire's 1999/00 Local Schools Budget per pupil of £2490 is exactly the same as the average of its statistical neighbours, but below County and national averages.

19. The LEA delegates a higher than average proportion of funds to schools and has streamlined central services as far as it can whilst maintaining an effective discharge of most functions. It has retained the lowest amount per pupil for strategic services in the country at £17 per pupil compared to £42 statistical neighbours and £39 counties average. Even allowing for the national differences in definitions of functions and the balance of strategic challenge and traded support in some areas, this is a very lean service. The amount it must delegate next year to complete Fair Funding is also the lowest, £18 per pupil compared to £43 average for both statistical neighbours and counties. The LEA is, therefore, already well on the way towards the targets set by central government for delegation to schools.

| | Oxfordshire | Statistical Neighbours | Counties | England |
|---|-------------|------------------------|----------|---------|
| Local Schools Budget (LSB) £ per pupil | £2490 | £2490 | £2586 | £2625 |
| Delegated School Budget (ISB) £ per pupil | £2095 | £2062 | £2089 | £2162 |

20. The LEA has been successful in attracting other sources of revenue funding. The Standards Fund 1999/00 total budget is £9.13m, of which £3.85m is LEA funding, though the LEA is concerned about meeting the matched funding for possible growth in this in future years. There are very positive partnerships with the Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) and Education Business Partnership (EBP) linking learning and economic development through innovative projects and staff development in schools. The LEA facilitated the Education Action Zone (EAZ), which is jointly led and part funded by the Hamilton Trust, and increasingly, the LEA is helping to develop specialist schools.

21. The Council has improved its overall financial standing and control over the past few years. It now has a three year plan and each service has medium term budgets. Funding is generally well managed, targeted and monitored each year, and there are early indicative budgets. However, late decisions on the final budget have caused unnecessary uncertainty and delay to schools.

22. There are appropriate mechanisms for involving governors and headteachers in discussing priorities for budget growth and reviewing the formula for allocating funds to schools. A full review of the formula is underway for the year 2000 because some aspects of the current formula do not fully support the present educational policy. There is very little explicit small school protection and the real terms cut in fixed costs has particularly affected small schools. Funding is based only on the most recent January roll figures and does not include a part based on estimated numbers for the following year. This is unfair to schools with rising rolls, as the current trigger means they are not fully funded for increases in pupils and staffing. The significant pupil turnover suffered by schools serving the armed forces is also insufficiently recognised within the present formula.

23. The LEA is low-spending on capital with a budget in 1999 of £3.7m, £45 per pupil, less than a third of the average of its statistical neighbours and below the County average. Historically low capital spend and low revenue spend on repairs and maintenance has led to deterioration and poor quality of many school buildings. However, the LEA has maximised the use of capital receipts and New Deal for Schools to replace the worst temporary classrooms, and improve technical and specialist provision. It has also secured private developer funding to expand and build new schools.

Council Structure

24. Oxfordshire County Council has been a 'hung' Council since 1985 with no party being in overall control. The political makeup at the start of the inspection was Conservative (27), Labour (19), Liberal Democrat (20) and Green (2). The Education Committee comprises 23 Councillors and 11 co-opted members, and there are five sub-committees including the Education Management Sub-Committee and the Schools Performance and Quality Sub-Committee. The Council has begun to consider alternative structures but there is no overall agreement on the way forward and progress has been slow. It is clear that the lack of consensus on some important issues in the Education Committee has, until very recently, impeded the development of a coherent medium or long-term strategy and caused damaging delays in areas such as the review of the three tier system in the City of Oxford.

The Education Development Plan (EDP)

25. The EDP sets out a suitable strategy for school improvement and has been approved by the Secretary of State for three years subject to the general conditions which apply to many LEAs. In the main the priorities are appropriate, reflecting the

national agenda, but also drawing upon a reasonably detailed and objective local audit and providing suitable links with local priorities.

26. One of the main strengths of the plan lies in the detail of its implementation and evaluation. The priorities have been used well as a starting point for consideration about the extent to which the departmental structure is the most effective to ensure their delivery. The translation of the plan into action is through the generally high quality individual Service Plans that are cross referenced to the EDP priorities and are to be evaluated against the achievement of those priorities. This provides an effective mechanism to ensure that school improvement remains at the heart of the LEA's work and that decisions about the structures and services needed are informed by this goal.

27. The overall attainment targets set in the EDP are within the range agreed by the Department for Education and Employment but it is clear from school visits that the individual school targets used to inform this process were not established with sufficient rigour. None of the individual school targets are identified by the LEA as insufficiently challenging, although it is clear from HMI visits and recent test results that for many schools the targets were too low.

28. A report on interim progress on the implementation of the EDP was presented to Members in September 1999 as part of a formal process of evaluation. It gives reasonable detail of progress against each of the priorities, but it does not give a sufficiently clear picture of the extent to which the various targets are achievable or could reasonably be exceeded. For example, it does not indicate to Members that the target of removing all schools from special measures and serious weaknesses is unattainable in the time scale suggested.

The Allocation of Resources to Priorities and Best Value

29. The LEA has robust internal processes to target its limited resources on priorities, and a corporate performance management process which links service plans to individual job plans and to the Beacon management programme. Its structures for Best Value appear to be developing well and it aims to review all education services in four years starting with special educational needs (SEN). In this it builds on a commitment and experience of offering low cost and high quality services, compared and analysed as part of the South West Education Benchmarking Group, and reviewed with stakeholder involvement.

Recommendations

In order to ensure that the education service funding is aligned with the LEA's priorities:-

- implement the planned move toward funding to at least SSA to facilitate the necessary improvements to the formula, an improved level of spend on school property maintenance, and increased financial and ICT central support to schools.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Implications of other functions

30. In the main this is an LEA which, with relatively low centrally retained funds, provides well focused and effective support to schools through services such as behaviour support services, the Education Social Worker Service, the Educational Psychology Service and the Governors Support Service. The impact of these services is described in detail in later sections of this report but they are, in general, assisting schools with improving standards. They have a clear mandate in terms of school improvement and raising attainment, and they are increasingly successful in evaluating their impact against their own targets and the priorities identified in the EDP. The services work well individually and, increasingly, collaboratively; guided by the same strategic aims.

Monitoring, challenge, support, intervention

31. In the main these functions are delivered through the Advisory and Inspection Service, although there are appropriate contributions from other branches such as the link officers in the Schools Branch and SEN support services from Services to Pupils Branch. The functions of monitoring, challenge, support and intervention, and the respective responsibilities of the schools and LEA in the discharge of these functions, are described clearly in recent guidance to schools. The guidance was established through appropriate consultation with all parties but there is still too much uncertainty in schools about its implementation. The mechanisms for monitoring and supporting schools are already largely effective. Challenge and intervention strategies are improving but remain unsatisfactory overall, particularly given the high level of under-performance in many schools. Strategic planning for the Advisory and Inspection Service (AIS) relates well to the priorities in the EDP, but does not sufficiently reflect variations in the level of need of the schools.

32. A reorganisation of AIS Branch in 1997 shifted the focus of its work, appropriately, toward supporting school self evaluation and raising pupil attainment. The very high level of buy-back into this service is based on positive perceptions of its quality, rather than any historic allegiance and it has enabled AIS to continue to provide specialist advice and support in all subject areas. All of the schools visited as part of the inspection felt that curriculum support and advice had made a positive impact on standards and quality and there was clear evidence to support this, particularly in the areas of literacy, numeracy and early years work. However, it was clear that there is too much variation in the quality of subject specific support, particularly in mathematics at secondary level.

33. The LEA has established a link adviser arrangement whereby all schools are routinely allocated three days per year for visits by an adviser who is associated with the school. The link advisers cover a range of schools but are not necessarily phase specialists for all their schools.

34. One of the main roles of the link adviser, as set out in the guidance to schools, is that of annually 'validating' the school self review; a process which includes the headteacher, chair of governors, the link adviser and a link officer for

the school. In its new form, which is a development of that used last year, the process is a potentially thorough one with a clearly defined structure and involving scrutiny of an appropriate range of evidence about the progress of the school. It results in an agreed written evaluation, which includes a judgement about the effectiveness of management in the school. Taken alongside the range of quantitative data available to the LEA this constitutes a useful mechanism for monitoring schools. However, the rigour of the evaluation is too variable at present and some headteachers remain sceptical about the lack of recent and relevant school management experience of some link advisers.

35. Importantly, not all schools need this degree of monitoring by the LEA. Given the relatively pressing needs of some schools in Oxfordshire it is not an effective use of resources to devote three days to every school for this function.

36. Challenge is increasingly high on the LEA's agenda and there is evidence of cases where schools, including those that are already achieving relatively well against national averages, have successfully been challenged to improve. Some schools have been encouraged to review their aspirations upward in terms of pupil attainment as a result of meetings with the link adviser but there are too many who have not. The LEA uses under-performance as one of the criteria for identifying schools that are a cause for concern. However, the LEA has not made it sufficiently explicit to all schools that this alone could lead to some form of intervention where performance is considerably lower than that for similar schools.

37. The performance management of the AIS is insufficiently well defined in terms of raising attainment. The functions of the service are outlined satisfactorily in the service plan but its contribution to school effectiveness lacks sufficient quantifiable detail to allow any rigorous evaluation of its impact.

Collection and Analysis of Data

38. After a slow start the support now provided in relation to the collection and analysis of data is effective. Before 1997, apart from gathering and analysing data at the GCSE end of the schools' spectrum, the LEA had done little to collect and analyse data centrally, or to induce schools to use their own data as a basis for raising performance. The relative performance of schools in similar contexts was not shared publicly and schools were not knowledgeable about how their own performance compared with that of others. There has been a significant change for the better. Data gathering activities and analyses have been considerably expanded to provide more comprehensive cover of the school system, although the absence of any standardised test data relating to pupils' attainment at the actual point of transfer from middle to upper schools is a significant weakness.

39. The LEA now provides each school with good profiles of performance and management data. The efficient centrally managed system has developed good links with schools to collect and analyse diverse sets of very useful data. As well as providing schools with a very good range of analytical information about their own performances, the detailed information about the performance and context of other schools is a useful yardstick by which schools can compare their performance. In most of the 19 Primary and Secondary schools visited, headteachers are

increasingly using the data well for internal management purposes, for review and for target-setting. LEA officers and advisers use the data as a factor in identifying schools in need of extra support. In a relatively short space of time, the LEA has been successful in raising schools' awareness of the significance of using data as a means of raising expectations of what can and should be achieved.

40. The LEA provides training courses and guidance on the analysis and use of data. These are highly regarded by schools. Target-setting training, with the LEA promoting a combination of a top-down approach encompassing national and LEA ambitions together with a pupil-based approach, informed schools about requirements. Nevertheless, the first round of target setting resulted in schools relying on prediction and setting relatively modest targets, which many schools have greatly exceeded. Advisers were not effective enough in encouraging schools to set higher, realisable targets. The LEA is aware of this and, through link advisers, has already informed some schools of the need to raise targets.

Support for Literacy

41. The support for raising standards in literacy is generally good but the early targets were not sufficiently challenging. The support is well planned, effectively managed and suitably linked to other LEA services. It contributes successfully to better teaching and to the improvement of standards; which are rising. The LEA is increasingly providing more challenge after a tentative start.

42. In the 1999 national KS2 English tests, at level 4 Oxfordshire's pupils' attainment overall was 4% above the national average of 70%. The tests show that standards have risen by 8%, which is 3% above the national increase. Achievement for 1999 is almost equal to the LEA's target of 74.5% for the year 2000 and is now 11% below the LEA's target of 85% for 2002. The LEA is rightly concerned that the overall averages conceal significant differences in the attainment of individual schools. For example, in five of the LEA's 10 Middle Schools attainment is unsatisfactory with the percentage of pupils gaining level 4 or above ranging from 32% to 56%; whilst in four other Middle Schools 74% or more of pupils attained level 4 or above.

43. Oxfordshire's training for the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) was very successful despite the initial reservations of some headteachers and governors about the need to implement the strategy. Most but not all of this reluctance has dissipated. The literacy hour is well established and well managed in the majority of schools visited and the majority of schools are successfully implementing the strategy.

44. The LEA is taking strong action to support low achieving schools. The intensive support provided is of very good quality and progress has often been good. The schools involved report that they derive great benefit from the work of the consultants, which includes very good help with planning, well-focused extra training, helpful demonstration lessons and observation of teaching with constructive feedback.

45. Most schools receive appropriate 'light touch' support for literacy. Extra training or guidance has been provided for a range of groups, for example for Volunteer Reading helpers, for teachers of children with English as an additional language and for teachers of children with special educational needs. A useful special schools literacy network has also been established.

46. Schools know well that raising standards in literacy is a key priority of the LEA. Nevertheless, in the initial round of target setting, the targets which schools set for themselves were often too low. In this year's national tests 40% of primary schools beat their own KS2 targets by 10% or more, demonstrating that the expectations of what could be achieved were too modest. Many schools have already met the targets for the Year 2000 cohort with the 1999 cohort.

Support for Numeracy

47. The LEA has effectively introduced the National Numeracy Strategy (NNS). Support for numeracy is well organised and planned, and is adequately resourced. The activities undertaken by the LEA are helping to raise standards. However, the rate of increase needs to be expedited and the LEA needs to set more challenging targets.

48. At KS2 standards in numeracy are slightly above the national average but the rate of improvement is lower than the rate nationally. The 1999 national tests show that at KS2 the percentage of pupils gaining level 4 or above increased by 9% whilst the national standard rose by 10%. Overall, at KS2, 70% of Oxfordshire pupils achieve level 4 or above compared with the national average of 69%. The LEA needs to increase its performance in mathematics by 6% to reach the target of 76% by the year 2002. Many schools have already met or exceeded their year 2000 targets with the 1999 cohort. Over half of the schools are in this position, with 78% of schools exceeding or within 10% of their target. Schools have underestimated what teachers and pupils can achieve and targets need to be raised.

49. The numeracy team is suitably focusing its main efforts on giving intensive support to forty three lower achieving schools. HMI visits indicate that the support so far is very good with consultants giving expert attention to providing extra training for teachers, giving help with planning, observing and commenting helpfully on the quality of teaching, giving demonstrations of good practice and responding to issues relevant to individual schools. Although these initiatives have been implemented only recently, the action taken is already having a positive effect on schools.

50. In non-intensive support schools, the numeracy team is successfully disseminating good practice through the work of partnership and subject networks. The team is giving good advice to schools on audit processes and action planning. Link advisers have been suitably trained and briefed about their roles in the implementation and monitoring of the strategy. For example, schools' provision for homework is to be monitored by link advisers. Schools have good information about the LEA's leading mathematics teachers (LMTs) but are generally not yet making use of their services, partly because of logistical reasons but also because the age range or context of the schools in which LMTs are based are not thought to match

the schools' needs. The LEA is aware of the issues and plans to address these in the coming year.

Support for ICT

51. The LEA is now providing satisfactory support to improve standards in ICT, albeit from a low baseline. Attainment in ICT is low in Oxfordshire schools, particularly at KS2 where fewer than 10% of pupils achieved level 4 in 1998. Analysis of inspection findings indicates particular weaknesses at KS3. ICT resources in schools are generally poor with little up to date equipment. The LEA has recognised this as a weakness.

52. The ICT Development Plan sets out a clear vision for phased development of ICT and is linked to Priority 3 in the EDP. It is based on a comprehensive audit of need and is differentiated according to phase with a major emphasis being placed on the Early Years and KS2. The plan also seeks to integrate curriculum and administrative applications although difficulties have been experienced as a result of other Council advice to schools. Central Information Technology (IT) services were outsourced in the early 1990s bringing a subsequent lack of IT expertise in corporate strategic thinking and policy. This has now been rectified but the LEA has come late to the game in this respect. Although the integrated LEA IT service is well-managed, central staff are under considerable pressure of time and this is felt by non-National Grid for Learning (NGfL) schools and in secondary schools where the LEA strategy has not been well understood. Good links are made with SEN advice and support functions, and with the NLS and NNS. Plans to link all schools via an intranet have fallen behind schedule.

53. Schools that have received the benefit of NGfL funding and accessed the advice and training available to them have made good progress. However, the gap between NGfL and non-NGfL schools is widening, with a growing sense of frustration in schools that have to wait their turn. Although the phased strategy was one that was agreed in consultation with schools, this frustration is understandable given the low base in terms of equipment and teacher expertise in many schools. The high level of demand upon the central team is understood by schools but means that advisers have little time to communicate overall strategy and direction to all schools and frequently present schools with very tight deadlines to be met for the submission of plans and bids.

54. The LEA's strategy for developing ICT is beginning to have an impact in schools, for example in Early Years settings and in schools that have accessed the full range of advice and training available to them. Lessons learned about preparation and negotiation with schools from the first phase of implementing the NGfL are being applied in the implementation of the second phase. It is too early to see the impact in terms of rising standards across the board. However, the signs are that teacher skills and confidence are growing.

55. The tightly focused and targeted support for each tranche of schools, supported by the New Opportunities Fund training, is good and provides good value for money. However, the needs of all schools are great. More attention should be

paid to the needs of schools that are not the subject of intensive support, or have yet to access their training entitlement.

Support for Schools Causing Concern

56. The support provided to special measures, serious weaknesses and schools of concern to the LEA is improving but, because of unacceptable variations in the degree of analysis of the nature of the problems, the support is unsatisfactory overall. In its EDP the LEA set an ambitious target of removing all schools from special measures and serious weaknesses by the year 2000. That the target was ambitious is to be applauded, but the mechanisms for ensuring well focused support and intervention were not established rapidly enough. The fact that further schools continue to be identified by OFSTED as having significant weaknesses indicates that procedures for early identification and support are not sufficiently rigorous.

57. There are currently eight schools subject to special measures, 14 with serious weaknesses, and 26 designated as a cause for concern to the LEA. Schools in the first two categories are all supported by individual 'task groups', which include the link officer and adviser from the LEA. The variability of the expertise within the task groups, and the extent to which the group has been able to identify and help remediate the underlying causes of the weaknesses in the schools, have been significant factors in determining their effectiveness. Some schools have been helped to make rapid progress but in other cases the support provided has not been sufficient or effective.

58. A steering group for Schools Requiring Additional Support (SRAS) has been established by the LEA to oversee and co-ordinate the support that is provided to the schools through the task groups. This is an effective mechanism for ensuring the efficient allocation of additional resources to the schools. Progress reports are provided to this group from the separate task groups but there is often insufficient clarity about interim targets for the schools or about the exit criteria and strategies. Although Members are informed through the party spokespersons about schools that are added to the agenda for this group they have minimal involvement in monitoring the decisions taken.

59. Headteachers of schools supported through SRAS and the task groups report that the LEA is increasingly providing a more considered and well co-ordinated response to the needs of the school, in contrast to its early "scattergun" approach. However, headteachers are not put into contact with others who are experiencing similar problems and there is no formal forum for headteachers of special measures and serious weakness schools.

Support for Governors

60. The support provided to governing bodies by officers and advisers is a significant strength of the LEA. The central support team for governing bodies is very lean but provides a very high standard of support. The quality of information and advice made available to governors is consistently good and the team keeps governors up to date with national developments. The courses provided through this team are relevant to the EDP priorities, well received and appropriate to the needs of

both the LEA and schools. The team undertakes self evaluation based on internal performance measures and against other LEAs. A particularly positive feature of the work of the team is that it monitors OFSTED reports on individual schools and suggests appropriate training to the governors in cases where weaknesses in governance are identified.

61. The small central team makes strenuous and successful efforts to fill most governing body vacancies. Nonetheless some vacancies, particularly those under the control of Council Members, remain long standing.

Support for School Management

62. The support provided by the LEA to improve school management is satisfactory overall but there are areas of weakness. Inspection evidence indicates that weaknesses in management were identified in many schools. These related particularly to weaknesses in development planning, monitoring and evaluation. The LEA has responded to its analysis of inspection data and drawn up a comprehensive programme for management support.

63. The range of support offered represents a well-planned and coherent package for headteachers to access. It is well led, particularly since an adviser appointment for headteacher development has been made. Courses such as Effective Primary Leadership and the conference on Self-Evaluation were well researched and generally well received. Appropriately, these courses drew on the expertise of established senior managers.

64. Schools appreciate the range of management support available to them and, in most cases, headteachers have made good use of it. The LEA gives good support for school development planning. Until the recent past, schools used a variety of formats of differing quality and usefulness to present their plans. Following a successful pilot project the LEA has produced, in collaboration with headteachers involved in the pilot, a well-conceived format for development planning. This fits very well with the process for school review and provides a good basis for planning for improvement. The LEA is actively encouraging schools to adopt the new format so that practice is consistent.

65. The LEA meets its statutory duty to secure headteacher appraisal with a high quality training and appraisal programme which is on target to ensure that all headteachers will have been appraised in the two years leading up to April 2000. Good advice and training are available through LEA, higher education institutions and national training programmes, and initiatives such as the Curriculum and Assessment network represent an effective means of developing evaluation and leadership skills in key senior managers.

66. Whilst this framework enables individuals to assess their needs and access the relevant support, the LEA's practices of monitoring needs and responding to them are less consistent. The targeting of LEA support to headteachers who need to be challenged or supported in the discharge of their duties is inconsistent. Although there are excellent examples of link advisers working with headteachers, the inconsistency of this aspect of LEA support constitutes a weakness. Some new

and acting headteachers have received very little additional support, for example through the identification of a mentor, and link advisers had not responded well to the significant management support needs of three headteachers in the schools visited.

Early Years

67. The LEA provides good support for early years. The planning for Early Years provision is efficient and the work is well managed. The LEA is making a strong contribution to the standards achieved in the early years settings, although it is not clear that this has contributed to higher standards in statutory education.

68. The Early Years team closely monitors the achievement and progress of institutions providing for under-fives. Information from regular visits by team members, OFSTED reports and information from link advisers is thoroughly analysed and the information is used well to plan further work. Team members give very good support by observing teaching, giving constructive feedback, and giving well-informed and perceptive advice on such topics as planning, curriculum provision, assessment and management. In most of the nine Primary and two nursery schools visited by HMI the quality of advice provided is held in very high regard. However, in three schools the LEA advice about provision for younger children was not sufficiently direct and incisive to ensure that teachers and other staff provide a curriculum that is well-structured to achieve the desirable outcomes for children's learning.

69. The LEA has very good links and works well with the independent, private and voluntary sector through the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP). A good Early Years Development Plan has been produced and agreed. The LEA's very good range of early years training courses are available to all of those working with young children in the maintained, public and private sector. The LEA has made good arrangements for accreditation towards gaining higher qualifications.

70. Some of the eight free-standing nursery schools retain their pupils until the beginning of the term following their fifth birthday. However, their governors were not invited to attend the initial training for the introduction of the national strategies in numeracy and literacy. The LEA has provided some supplementary training but HMI visits indicate that staff and governors are not sufficiently well informed about the national strategies.

71. The LEA, in consultation with the EYDCP, contributes to a mixed economy of provision for under fives through free standing and attached nursery schools, Family Centres, nursery classes and Early Years Units together with some integrated nursery provision for children with special educational needs. There is a strong political will to increase the LEA's provision. The LEA's admission policy is for children to start primary schools as rising fives, later than many other LEAs, although a number of schools are in the process of meeting the LEA's criteria to set up Early Years Units to provide for four year olds. This creates some inequalities of access to maintained provision. At present 60% of all four-year-olds and about 10% of three year olds are educated in the LEA maintained sector with the remainder

either using the strong private, voluntary or independent sector or remaining at home.

Recommendations

In order to promote school improvement and to achieve higher standards in schools:-

- provide more consistent challenge to schools to set realistic targets which reflect more accurately the potential of the pupils;
- focus AIS time more effectively on schools with the greatest need;
- improve the analysis of the underlying causes of weaknesses in schools identified by OFSTED and the LEA as weak schools, and ensure that support is targeted more rigorously to address the type and level of need;
- increase Members' oversight of the progress of schools with weaknesses;
- provide clearer guidance about ICT to schools which are not involved in the NGfL, especially secondary schools, and improve the arrangements for their training and support;
- ensure that the Early Years team give consistent and unequivocal advice about the need to structure children's learning to achieve the desirable outcomes.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate Planning

72. Decision-making has often been a slow process in the Council; partly because of the lack of overall political control. Policy decisions have often been brokered through *ad hoc* alliances between any two of the major parties and have not historically been part of a clearly articulated corporate direction for the authority. Delays have resulted to important decisions about issues such as the review of the three tier system in the City, as well as to cross-cutting issues such as the establishment of a Children's Services Sub-Committee.

73. The recent agreement of a medium term plan for Oxfordshire indicates a desire to establish greater clarity and coherence in the overall Council objectives. This has allowed departments to set out their own medium term plans with a realistic expectation that there is an overall commitment to them by Members. The approach has involved departments drawing together, retrospectively, a range of existing plans to establish three-year plans that are in keeping with the unifying vision, which Members have recently set out for the authority.

74. Against this backdrop the Chief Education Officer (CEO) has successfully established a clear strategic direction for education that has embraced the central government agenda of raising attainment and focused on efficiency and effectiveness. When the present CEO was appointed there was no Development Plan for the LEA and no senior management team in place. There has been a substantial improvement in the structure of the department and approach to school improvement since that time. Each of the statutory plans produced by the department such as the EDP, the EYDCP, and the Lifelong Learning Development Plan is of good quality and is fully coherent with the aims of raising standards and improving social inclusion.

75. In the recent Oxfordshire Medium Term Plan the Council support for raising levels of achievement in schools is one of the main service priorities. Performance review of schools, and officers, by Members is mainly through the Schools' Performance and Quality sub-Committee. This group considers reports on standards in national tests as well as a routine précis of OFSTED reports. However, although senior officers and some Members recognise the issue of poor performance in many schools, there has been no unequivocal statement from Members that overall standards in Oxfordshire schools should be better.

Management Services

76. The LEA provides central support services which are lean, efficient, expert, valued by schools and good value for money. Generally, individual staff are experienced and there are very good relationships between them and schools. However, there are insufficient staff in the financial support section in particular to meet the needs of schools fully and deliver an efficient service.

77. Each service and unit has a Service Plan setting out a consistent framework for their role, improvement and review. These are useful working documents aligned

with concepts of Best Value, and national best practice and include a clear appraisal of strengths and weaknesses. They are monitored and link to individual performance monitoring through a corporate performance management process. The LEA has the management capacity to improve further, utilising Best Value reviews.

78. Services for sale are set out in the Oxfordshire Schools Joint Provision document which is being amended for 2000 in the light of full delegation; looking more closely at entitlement, costs and services, and improving the clarity of information to governors and schools. Schools bought back services worth £2,781K from the LEA in 1998/99 and are projected to buy back £3,611K in 1999/2000, around 2% of the Individual Schools Budget. In some technical areas the LEA has out-sourced and the contractor offers a service. The LEA has effective processes, involving schools, to review and evaluate services, including those provided by external contractors, though there is scope to improve the monitoring and communication about property support.

Schools Branch Link Officers

79. Schools Branch offers a part-delegated one stop service of management support advice. Ten Link Officers, one named for each school, work along with the Link Adviser to provide support. They attend an annual review with the headteacher and Chair of Governors. They are responsive and valued by schools and back up the small specialist personnel and finance functions with integrated administrative support on personnel, finance and funding and services for individual statemented pupils. In addition to leading on many areas of policy advice and formulation, they also co-ordinate admissions and act as advocate for the schools with other council services.

Financial support

80. Schools value the finance service, but almost all reported problems accessing it and most wanted more staff to support schools in budget support and approval.

81. Schools are provided with the tools to plan and predict their own budgets up to three years ahead. However, this does not easily match the schools own financial recording or the Council's central finance computer systems. These mismatches together with the delays caused by the overload on staff meant many schools reported that their budgets, and their carry-over from the previous year, were not agreed until well into the financial year.

Personnel

82. The service is very lean and effective in day to day support and advice. It is valued by schools, and has regular meetings with a group of headteachers to review the services within the Oxfordshire Schools Joint Provision offer. It issues model procedures, provides support for difficult issues and training, including a headteacher induction programme. Good partnerships with the TEC and EBP provide support for Investors in People in schools and management development training in schools.

83. Benchmarking suggests the service has half the average ratio of personnel staff to pupils, though the Schools Branch link officers also deal with some standard staffing issues. The service will be part of a corporate Best Value review of personnel next year. It has responded well to issues of concern to schools but proactive developments such as sickness absence analysis and preparation for performance related pay are constrained by the low level of staffing.

Premises and Asset Management Plan

84. The externalised service provided in relation to premises is not well regarded by many schools. The Council externalised certain property services under a single integrated partnership contract six years ago and the contractor offers a range of services to schools, of which 96% buy-in. The contractor also manages major capital works including design and management of new schools for the LEA and carries out detailed condition surveys for the Asset Management Plan (AMP) process. The AMP has been well planned and implemented. It is co-ordinated with other plans and sets out the scale of the problem and priorities for funding. Schools are expected to prioritise their own funding on premises in line with the LEA AMP priorities.

85. Schools are frustrated that the condition surveys have identified the detailed needs in each school but funding is not available to meet them. Preventative maintenance has been under-funded for some years and this has led to poor quality buildings in several schools. The LEA estimates the total backlog of repairs is £43m whilst the funding for repairs and maintenance in 1999/00 is £2.7m. The LEA acknowledges property has been under-funded for some time and is rightly concerned that it now spends more on reactive repairs than on planned maintenance to prevent problems.

86. Many schools believe there is scope to improve the property service the LEA has procured, and the LEA and contractor need to further improve their monitoring systems and their communication with schools. The LEA believes it has procedures in place to allay the concern of some schools that the contractor has two roles, as surveyor and then as contractor for problems it has identified. Eight of the schools visited believed that the condition of buildings was constraining school improvement and were unhappy with the quality of repairs or with delays or the project management of building projects. Three schools were positive about their experiences and the others were mixed.

Grounds Maintenance and cleaning

87. The quality of service provided to schools is too variable. Secondary schools in particular responded to the survey with criticisms of the quality of cleaning and grounds maintenance, which is provided directly by the Council, and of their ability to influence improvements. Processes for monitoring do exist but clearly are not sufficiently robust for the service to enjoy the confidence of schools.

Administrative ICT

88. The development of administrative ICT within the LEA, particularly in relation to electronic links with schools, has been slow. The LEA was late in taking a strategic direction on such matters but once it started NGfL, the installation, support and training was generally good. The LEA now has a clear plan to develop electronic links with and between schools and build on its improvements in data collection and analysis. Day to day support for administrative ICT is outsourced and provides well-regarded training and support to schools developing their administrative uses of ICT. The LEA has set up effective monitoring involving schools.

Recommendations

In order to increase the impact of management support services:-

- improve the quality and responsiveness of the financial support to schools;
- broker access to well regarded property services.

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION

Strategy

89. The LEA is working towards a more coherent strategy for SEN but some shortcomings still have to be overcome. The LEA has recently embarked upon a major review of special educational needs provision and has published, after extensive discussion and consultation, a new draft SEN policy and development plan for formal consultation. The policy clearly asserts the LEA's commitment to social inclusion and to the educational practices that flow from this. In this, it builds upon the LEA's 1993 SEN Policy. The percentage of pupils with statements of special educational need is lower than in similar authorities and nationally, reflecting in part the LEA's strategy of focusing support upon pupils at the early stages of the Code of Practice. The SEN development plan gives a clear articulation of the directions to be followed and the framework for achieving its targets. SEN actions are a consistent feature of the priorities to support school improvement outlined in the EDP.

Statutory Obligations

90. The evidence presented by the LEA and from visits to schools suggests that the LEA meets all of its statutory duties except that the percentage of statements drawn up in eighteen weeks falls short of the national guideline figure. The LEA supports annual reviews effectively with a clear rationale for attendance at reviews and uses the occasions well to monitor the effectiveness of the provision in raising attainment. The LEA attends all extra-district, residential and looked-after children reviews and 14+ reviews are conducted very effectively on a multi-agency basis.

91. Appeals against LEA decisions are very low compared to the national figure. This indicates a high level of parental satisfaction with the statementing process, although there have been some cases where communication between the LEA and parents has been poor. Schools find that unacceptably long delays in the process leave the level and nature of funding for pupils uncertain and puts pressure on school budgets. Furthermore, the number and timing of transfer points in the three-tier system in the city often delays the statementing process for individuals.

Improvement and Value for Money

92. The LEA exercises its functions in support of pupils with SEN with a clear focus on securing access to the full curriculum and to raising achievement. It makes a positive contribution to school improvement through its policies of specialist early intervention, both at Stages 1 to 3 of the SEN Code of Practice, and through the emphasis on supporting teaching and learning. This is a feature of the work of all of the support services, especially the educational psychology service. Schools are hindered only by the level of resources available – both in central services and in delegated funds to schools.

93. Overall, the LEA spends £119 per pupil, compared with a national average of £156 and an average in similar authorities of £145 per pupil. Funds for schools are delegated through a sophisticated SEN Index that targets resources to schools in

greatest need through a series of proxy indicators. Despite recent budget decisions taken by Members who have increased the amount delegated through the SEN Index, the actual amount spent in schools was greater than that delegated in every school where this was inspected. A particular issue is the requirement for schools to provide the first five hours of support needed for each pupil at Stage 3 and beyond. This can be significantly different from the delegated amount, and makes it more difficult to bid for additional hours at Stage 3 to support the LEA's early intervention strategy. Given its success in educating a very high proportion of all pupils (98.9%) in mainstream schools, and the positive view of the support schools receive, the LEA is achieving its objectives satisfactorily within the limited financial resources.

94. Central support services are held in high esteem but are also very much in demand. This is a particular issue for the highly regarded autism outreach service and for speech therapy. However, the recently appointed Principal Educational Psychologist and the Principal Education Officer (Pupil Services) have made very significant improvements to targeting the work of services and, in the case of the Education Psychology Service, freeing up time from unproductive administration. This has enabled more early intervention and higher levels of training and development work with teachers in schools. The delegated Special Needs Advisory Support and Peripatetic special needs co-ordinator scheme provides effective support, particularly for smaller primary schools.

Analysis

95. Inevitably, given the LEA's drive towards more inclusive education, the role of special schools has come under scrutiny. Insufficient attention was paid in the early stages of the SEN review to explaining the future role envisaged for them. The lack of clarity was reflected in two mainstream schools which were uncertain as to how far the LEA saw inclusion being taken. The LEA has recognised that its special schools need to be brought more fully into its plans, not least for the specialist knowledge they can contribute. This may also address the isolation felt in some of the special schools, due in part to a change in adviser and officer support for the schools as a result of being attached to partnership groups. It is also a consequence of officer shortages and the LEA's increasing focus on providing SEN specialist support to mainstream schools.

96. Overall, the LEA's support for pupils with special educational needs is characterised by well-qualified staff working energetically with a clear sense of purpose and direction. Services are well managed and are focused on raising pupil achievement and supporting teachers. They were judged to be making a positive contribution to school improvement in nearly all of the mainstream schools visited. Advisory support for special needs co-ordinators (SENCOs), particularly those new in post and for schools with identified weaknesses, is good and SENCO groups are facilitated, both authority wide and in partnership groups. ICT based support is provided for primary school SENCOs. A good range of training support is available, through both long and short courses for teachers and Learning Support Assistants (LSAs). An accredited course for LSAs was observed in three schools to be having a major impact, both in terms of the confidence of the LSA and in the positive effect it was having on other staff.

Recommendations

In order to improve communication about its policies for inclusion:-

- more specific information about plans should be provided to all schools and special schools should be more closely involved in the formulation of policy.

In order to meet the national target for completing statements of educational need:-

- further steps should be taken to speed up the process and to ensure that issues of continuity between middle and upper schools are resolved.

SECTION 5: ACCESS

97. The LEA meets its statutory requirements in full and has successfully combined inter-agency approaches in line with clear policies for promoting social inclusion. The LEA, and individual schools, have been successful in drawing down additional funding for initiatives linked to social inclusion and behaviour support. The services provided represent very good value for money. A wide range of plans, including the Children's Services Plan and the Quality Protects Management Action Plan, are linked with the Behaviour Support Plan and to the EDP. Oxfordshire has clear and comprehensive policies for promoting social inclusion through early intervention and for the welfare and protection of children. These policies secure effective inter-agency approaches through the Children's Strategy Group, the proposed Children's Sub-Committee and the newly appointed Children's Rights Commissioner. The LEA meets its statutory requirements with regard to the organisation of school places and admissions to school. The admissions and appeals process is effective. There is a clear strategic direction and data has been used well to develop the school organisation, infant class size and asset management plans, linking them effectively to school improvement. This has been with the full involvement of schools and the Dioceses.

The Supply of School Places

98. The School Organisation Plan is soundly based, recognising factors such as the County population growth, which is double the national rate, the level of surplus places, and details of growth in the four County towns. The School Organisation Committee has met and agreed the Plan and is developing its own distinctive role supported by briefing from the LEA.

99. The LEA acknowledges surplus places in secondary schools are above comparable levels, and that it needs to take action. A number of measures have already been put in place to address this. However, the LEA needs to be more decisive in its policy and implementation regarding the smallest primary and secondary schools. These need to be appropriately resourced and supported within a clear long-term strategy which considers their educational, social and financial viability.

Surplus Places

| | Total Number schools | S21 return % surplus places | July 1999 | Number of schools over 25% surplus | % |
|-----------|----------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|------------------------------------|-------|
| Primary | 232 | 9.3% | 7.7% | 24 | 10.3% |
| Secondary | 45 | 12.8% | 11.6% | 6 | 13% |

100. The LEA has worked hard with schools in an implementation group to develop and implement the Infant Class Size Plan. In January 1998 18% of infant pupils were in classes over 30 and this fell to 5% in September 1999. This was achieved by changes in admissions numbers, more Early Years Units and grant of £1m in 98/99, funding 59 additional teachers. It is not yet clear whether increased KS2 class sizes are related to implementation of the plan or other factors.

101. The LEA has begun consultation on proposals to rationalise provision in Oxford City to two-tier; currently it has the only three-tier system in the County. This decision has been made after years of uncertainty, which has blighted some of the schools. Inevitably there are some complex issues still to be resolved but, appropriately, the LEA has set out a vision for change and improvement based on the need to promote educational improvement, release resources, cut surplus places, improve school buildings and facilities, tackle discontinuity of curriculum, and create a 'Learning City' with specialist secondary schools. The LEA has sharpened its policy of reviewing the viability of under-performing or very small primary schools. It is co-ordinating new school provision appropriately and is developing an innovative joint new build replacement for a special school with a new primary school.

Admissions

102. The LEA has set up an Admission Forum and provides information to parents that meets requirements. A pilot to computerise all admissions applications in the City may be extended as it has improved effectiveness in processing preferences. The LEA co-ordinates admissions to primary reception classes and provides guidelines for admission to nursery schools and classes and early years units. However, a practical consequence of the arrangements is that some pupils stay in nursery classes or schools beyond the age of five, whilst other pupils start school as rising fives, or at four plus in the early years units.

Provision of Education Otherwise Than At School

103. There are effective arrangements for provision of pupils with long term illnesses through the hospital schools and outreach services which also provide home tuition when needed. Provision for excluded pupils is very good. The LEA's aims for inclusion are effectively translated into practice as a result of targeted central support and a high degree of collaboration between schools, especially secondary schools, and with other agencies including the Youth Service.

104. Permanent exclusions in Oxfordshire are very low, falling by 8% to 74 pupils in 1998/9. Rates of exclusion are high in a small number of secondary schools and this is being addressed effectively in most cases. Provision is made through the 6 PRUs and 2 schools for emotionally and behaviourally disturbed (EBD) pupils, although the LEA's policy is one of speedy re-integration and the PRUs have a remit to support re-integration and to assist secondary schools in early intervention strategies to prevent exclusions occurring. Primary schools are also well assisted by the EBD school and the PRU. Schools value this support and, although the Audit Commission survey indicated average levels of satisfaction in secondary schools, the sample of secondary schools visited gave a strong endorsement of both the policy and its operation.

Attendance

105. Attendance in primary and secondary schools is above the national average. The Education Social Worker Service (ESW service) provides effective, and

increasingly well targeted, support to families and to schools. The service has been re-organised, minor problems of under-performance have been resolved, and ESWs' time has been re-allocated to take account of the differing needs in some areas. Partly as a result of this, referrals to the service are increasing and the success of its targeted work is already being seen. The percentage of pupils attending for less than 80% of the time fell from 7.3% in 1997 to 4.8% in 1998. In schools visited, the ESW was generally felt to be of good quality, working well with the school on initiatives to improve attendance and giving good support to families. Good examples of the Rapid Response strategy were also seen.

Behaviour Support

106. There is a wide range of strategies providing effective support for schools in improving behaviour. The early intervention work of the PRUs is referred to above. The Behaviour Support Plan, although focused on pupils with EBD, is based on a comprehensive audit of need and has at its heart the need to support schools through advice and training in developing their approaches to improving behaviour and raising achievement. In this respect the work of the EBD Outreach Service is most effective, providing practical advice and training as well as supporting pupils on an individual basis in schools. The Plan itself was the subject of wide consultation, draws in a full range of inter-agency support and contains helpful guidance on the development of a Whole School Behaviour Policy. The LEA is clearly having an impact in this area, in only one school visited was there a feeling that LEA support was inadequate and that the school was having to make its own way. In the other schools support for improving behaviour was highly rated.

Health, Safety, Welfare, Child Protection

107. The LEA has clear policies on health and safety. Schools are given detailed, well-presented guidance which covers comprehensively the issues related to health and safety in schools. Headteachers and governors have benefited from the training courses provided, for example the training in principles of risk assessment. Officers are usually quick to respond to requests for help and visit schools experiencing difficulties to inspect and give advice as well as monitoring Health and safety in schools generally. Children's welfare and child protection are a prime concern of the local authority and are supported by clear policies and effective liaison between departments and agencies. The multi-agency strategy on Child and Adolescent Mental Health is an excellent example of co-operation between Health, Social Services and Education driven by the welfare needs of the young people. Training in Child Protection procedures is very good and schools report prompt and efficient working practices.

Looked-After Children

108. Provision for children looked after by the local authority is well planned and is driven by the twin priorities of ensuring that their progress is monitored and that their attendance, wherever possible in mainstream schools, is secured. In the latter the

Connect project, to re-integrate children looked after into schools after an exclusion, has had a very high success rate and its funding has now been extended, assuring its medium term future. One school associated with the project has also bid successfully for external funding to run a scheme whereby sixth form students mentor younger pupils. In one school, some difficulties were encountered in maintaining consistent telephone contact with the key staff for children in care as duty rosters meant that follow-up actions by the school were rarely dealt with by the same person.

Ethnic Minority Children

109. The support for children of ethnic minority heritage, including Travellers' children, is a strength of the LEA. The delegation of funds to schools from the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant (EMAG) has proved successful in nearly all schools. In all but one of the visits to schools supported through the grant, good examples of practice were seen with the EMAG staff being well-integrated into the line management of the school whilst still benefiting from the professional support and training provided by the central EMAG service. The service Action Plan has a sharp focus on attainment, an appropriate focus given that the authority's analysis reveals under-achievement for minority ethnic groups. Exclusions are closely monitored and challenging targets have been set for reducing their incidence.

Social Exclusion

110. The LEA has very clear policies to combat social exclusion. Their two main strands centre around adopting multi-agency approaches to secure coherence across a wide range of public sector and voluntary support and to intervene early to prevent social exclusion. Education policies focus on raising achievement as a key element in preventing disaffection and the LEA's policy of inclusive education supports this well. Good leadership has been given on equal opportunities issues and the council's guidelines on race equality, including the adoption of Race Standards, have recently been revised and re-issued. Good advice and training is offered to schools and there is evidence in their practices and policies to show that the leadership given by the LEA is appreciated by schools. The successful EAZ bid, along with several Single Regeneration Budget projects, brings additional resources into the authority in support of its policies for social inclusion.

Recommendations

In order to make best use of its resources:-

- take decisive action to reduce further the number of surplus places in secondary schools.

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

LEA Strategy for School Improvement

In order to ensure that the education service funding is aligned with the LEA's priorities:-

- implement the planned move toward funding to at least SSA to facilitate the necessary improvements to the formula, an improved level of spend on school property maintenance, and increased financial and ICT central support to schools.

School Improvement

In order to promote school improvement and to achieve higher standards in schools:-

- provide more consistent challenge to schools to set realistic targets which reflect more accurately the potential of the pupils;
- focus AIS time more effectively on schools with the greatest need;
- improve the analysis of the underlying causes of weaknesses in schools identified by OFSTED and the LEA as weak schools, and ensure that support is targeted more rigorously to address the type and level of need;
- increase Members' oversight of the progress of schools with weaknesses;
- provide clearer guidance about ICT to schools which are not involved in the NGfL, especially secondary schools, and improve the arrangements for their training and support;
- ensure that the Early Years team give consistent and unequivocal advice about the need to structure children's learning to achieve the desirable outcomes.

Strategic Management

In order to increase the impact of management support services:-

- improve the quality and responsiveness of the financial support to schools;
- broker access to well regarded property services.

Special Educational Provision

In order to improve communication about its policies for inclusion:-

- more specific information about plans should be provided to all schools and special schools should be more closely involved in the formulation of policy.

In order to meet the national target for completing statements of educational need:-

- further steps should be taken to speed up the process and to ensure that issues of continuity between middle and upper schools are resolved.

Access

In order to make best use of its resources:-

- take decisive action to reduce further the number of surplus places in secondary schools.

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