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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. The inspection also took account of the Local Government Act 1999, insofar as it relates to work undertaken by the LEA on Best Value.

2. The inspection was partly based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA, on school inspection information and audit reports, on documentation and discussions with LEA members, council staff, headteachers, 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 353 schools. The overall response rate was 78 per cent.

3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to 14 primary 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 are also considered.

COMMENTARY

4. Northamptonshire is a county of sharp contrasts with a number of distinct and diverse communities. It contains scattered rural communities and the larger urban areas of Northampton and Corby where unemployment rates are three and four times the national average. By contrast, South Northamptonshire is one of the most prosperous areas of the country. Overall, the county's unemployment rate is low in relation to the national average.

5. One of the council's key strategic objectives is 'to continually improve educational achievement' but despite a strong commitment to education, the educational progress of pupils is below the national average between Key Stages 1 and 2, and between Key Stages 2 and 3. Attainment is above average in all the core subjects at the end of Key Stage 1 and is broadly in line with the national average at the end of Key Stages 2 and 3. By the end of Key Stage 4, the percentage of pupils achieving five or more A*-C grades at GCSE, and the rate of improvement, are broadly in line with that found in similar authorities and nationally.

6. The LEA's approach to school improvement is improving. The Education Development Plan provides a clear and appropriate strategy for raising educational achievement, and services have been reconfigured to provide a more appropriate response to the Code of Practice on LEA-School Relations. However, despite these changes, there remains a lack of clarity in some schools regarding the LEA's strategy for monitoring, challenge, intervention and support. The LEA is effectively promoting school autonomy, in particular through the annual performance review process. However, the identification of weaknesses in leadership and management, and in the timeliness of intervention and support to rectify them, are unsatisfactory.

7. The LEA has developed a bold and innovative strategy to promote social inclusion with a strong focus on raising standards of attainment. The establishment of an integrated service for inclusion and pupil support is almost complete and schools are supportive of the coherent strategic framework adopted by the LEA, which encompasses support for special educational needs; minority ethnic attainment; and support for improving pupil behaviour. The LEA's strategy for special educational needs is good and reflects a staged programme of development to achieve greater inclusion. The LEA is providing good support for pupils of minority ethnic heritage, including Travellers, and has given good leadership to schools in tackling racism. Whilst strategic leadership and management of the inclusion and pupils support service is good, it is too soon to judge the impact of the significant structural changes in the LEA's support to schools.

8. The chief executive, senior elected members and the corporate director provide a clear sense of direction for the education service with a determined focus on raising standards across the county. They have been successful in establishing a secure strategic partnership with schools that recognises the respective roles and responsibilities of schools and the LEA. The education budget has grown over the last four years and the proportion of the local schools' budget delegated to schools is high. The LEA has been prepared to confront difficult issues in relation to the pattern of school provision. The recent consultation on school organisation within

Northampton, with its proposed change to a two-tier system, has received cross-party support and is being managed very effectively.

9. The LEA performs almost all of its functions satisfactorily, and strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses. The following aspects of work are performed particularly effectively:

- support for early years;
- corporate planning processes;
- the leadership of elected members;
- the leadership of senior officers;
- partnership working with schools and other agencies;
- support for personnel;
- special educational needs strategy and management;
- support for attendance
- support for minority ethnic children, including Travellers; and
- strategies to combat racism.

10. The few weaknesses include:

- the identification and support for schools causing concern; and
- support to payroll.

11. The LEA has already demonstrated its ability to manage change effectively. The senior officers provide effective leadership and have the capacity and capability to address the recommendations made in this report. The imminent Best Value review of the various methods for securing support for school improvement, and the nature and rigour of the fundamental challenge within it, will also be crucial to securing higher standards of attainment in the future.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

12. Northamptonshire serves a population of 630,000. It is a county of sharp contrasts with a number of distinct and diverse communities. Around a third of the population live in Northampton, a further third in the smaller towns of Corby, Kettering, Wellingborough, Daventry and Rushden and the remaining third live in scattered rural communities. The town of Corby rates highly on indices of social need and parts of Northampton are also disadvantaged, with unemployment rates three and four times the national average. By contrast, South Northamptonshire is one of the most prosperous areas of the country. Overall, the county's unemployment rate is low in relation to the national average.

13. The proportion of the population from minority ethnic groups is growing. It includes children of asylum seekers from Kosovo and the Balkans. In the school population, the proportion of minority ethnic heritage pupils is six per cent, which is below the national figure of 12.1 per cent.

14. The current statutory school population is 103,677. The pattern of school provision varies across the county. Within the borough of Northampton, and also in the Oundle area, there is a three-tier system with pupils transferring from lower to middle schools at the age of nine years, and on to upper schools at thirteen. Elsewhere in the county, a two-tier system exists with pupils transferring to secondary schools at the age of eleven. The LEA is currently consulting on proposals to move to a two-tier system in Northampton.

15. There are 351 maintained schools in the county; 36 secondary (including 10 upper schools), 22 middle schools, 270 primary (including 43 infant, 43 junior and 58 lower schools), 13 special and 8 nursery schools. Nursery provision is also available within 39 nursery units attached to schools and two combined nursery centres catering for three and four year olds. Twelve per cent of schools (43) are voluntary aided and a further sixteen per cent (59) are voluntary controlled. Twenty-two schools were formerly grant maintained and are now foundation schools. Post-16 education is provided at 38 upper and secondary schools throughout the county, except in Daventry where there is a tertiary college. The authority maintains one pupil referral unit based on six sites across the county known as a complementary education centres (CECs). There are 12 specialist schools within Northamptonshire; six technology, four languages, one arts and one sports college. Eight primary schools have Beacon status. Since September 2000, an Education Action Zone (EAZ) has been established in Corby and includes one special, four secondary and 20 primary schools. One of the secondary schools was opened as a fresh start school in September 2001, following the closure of two secondary schools formerly designated as requiring special measures.

16. The percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals in primary schools (11.2 per cent) is below the national average of 19.7 per cent for the year 2000. For secondary schools, the figure of 12.9 per cent is broadly in line with the national average. The school meals service was terminated in 1992.

17. In 2000, 2.7 per cent of primary and 3.2 per cent of secondary aged pupils were the subject of statements of special educational needs. This is broadly in line with the national average for primary aged pupils and below the national average for secondary pupils.

Performance

18. Key features of the performance of schools and pupils in Northamptonshire are given below.

- OFSTED inspection data shows that the attainment of pupils on entry to primary schools is above that found in similar authorities and nationally;
- attainment at the end of Key Stage 1 in all core subjects is above that found in similar authorities and nationally. The rate of improvement in all core subjects is broadly in line with the national trend;
- attainment at the end of Key Stage 2 in all core subjects is broadly in line with that found in similar authorities and nationally. The rate of improvement in all core subjects is below the national trend;
- attainment at the end of Key Stage 3 in all core subjects is broadly in line with that found nationally. In mathematics and science, it is broadly in line with the levels found in similar authorities, but below in English. Whilst the rate of improvement is above the national trend in science, it is similar to the national trend in mathematics and below in English;
- at the end of Key Stage 4, the percentage of pupils achieving five or more A*-C grades in the GCSE, and the rate of improvement, are broadly in line with that found in similar authorities and nationally. The average points score per candidate is also broadly in line, but the rate of improvement is below the level found in similar authorities and nationally;
- the average points score for pupils entered for two or more A levels or GNVQ (Advanced) is broadly in line with that found nationally, but below that found in similar authorities. The rate of improvement is broadly in line with that found nationally, but below that in similar authorities; and
- the progress of pupils between Key Stages 1 and 2 and between Key Stage 2 and 3 is below the national average. Between Key Stages 3 and 4, the progress of pupils is in line with the national average.

19. OFSTED inspection data shows that the percentage of primary schools in Northamptonshire judged good or very good (74 per cent) is above the national average (70 per cent) and the average found in similar authorities (70 per cent). Evidence from primary schools that have been inspected twice suggests that improvements have been made in the quality of education and in the management and efficiency of the school. Few primary schools are identified as requiring much improvement.

20. For secondary schools, OFSTED inspection data shows that the percentage of schools judged to be good or very good (77 per cent) is above the average found in similar authorities (71 per cent) and nationally (67 per cent). Evidence from the secondary schools that have been inspected twice suggests that improvements have been made in the quality of education, management and efficiency, and the climate of the school. However, the proportion of secondary schools requiring much improvement is slightly higher than in similar authorities and nationally.

21. Attendance in primary schools is above the rate found nationally. In secondary schools, the level of attendance is broadly in line with the national rate. Overall, attendance rates are less than those of statistical neighbours. The percentage of sessions missed due to unauthorised absence is broadly in line with the national average in both primary and secondary schools. The level of permanent exclusions is below the national level in primary schools and broadly in line with the national level in secondary schools.

22. In June 2001, two primary schools and one middle school were subject to special measures. Six schools (four primary schools, one special school and one secondary school) have been found by OFSTED to have serious weaknesses. One primary school has been judged by OFSTED to be underachieving.

Funding

23. In the 2000/01 financial year Northamptonshire's education Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) per pupil was broadly in line with the national average and slightly higher than the average for English counties. Northamptonshire's education budget has grown over the last four years and is set at 1.5 per cent over SSA for 2001/02.

	Education SSA (£m)	Expenditure (Budget)	Expenditure as % of SSA
1998/1999	243.7	241.5	99.1%
1999/2000	257.8	259.8	100.8%
2000/2001	271.0	274.3	101.2%
2001/2002	284.3	288.7	101.5%

(Source: LEA)

24. Centrally retained spending is very low overall. In 2000/01, it was only £317 per pupil compared with the county average of £432 per pupil. Spending patterns within this sum were broadly in line with English and county averages. There were, however, some exceptions, notably:

- the retained special educational needs spending was £90 compared with England (£160), county (£147) and statistical neighbours (£130), which reflects the high level of delegation to schools; and
- home to school transport costs in Northamptonshire (£66 per pupil) were lower than the England average (£68) and considerably lower than the county (£100) and statistical neighbours (£95) averages.

25. Both primary and secondary school budget shares were higher than the averages for English counties and statistical neighbours.

2000/01	Northampton shire	County	Statistical Neighbours
Primary ISB per pupil	£1,798	£1,739	£1,742
Secondary ISB per pupil	£2,448	£2,376	£2,396

(Source: CIPFA)

26. The council is taking up its full Standards Fund allowance in 2001/2002. Northamptonshire County Council has achieved some success in attracting external funding through the European Social Fund, the Lottery and Sports Council grants. The LEA has secured formula capital allocations from the Department of Education and Skills (DfES) as a result of satisfactory progress on its asset management plan (AMP) and has been active in developing a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) partnership scheme intended to deliver additional secondary and primary age places south of Northampton.

Council structure

27. Northamptonshire County Council is Labour controlled and comprises 39 Labour, 33 Conservative and one Liberal Democrat councillor. There is broad cross-party support for education as a major priority of the council. The leader of the council and the chief executive have provided clear leadership and direction on educational issues, and in particular, on the current proposals to re-organise educational provision within Northampton.

28. A cabinet structure was established in April 1998 and provides democratic control of day-to-day decisions. The membership comprises the leader of the council and five members of the ruling party. Each cabinet member has a portfolio of services, including the lead member for education and community learning who works closely with the corporate director for education and community learning. In September 1999, an executive committee with all party membership and seven select committees replaced the traditional committee system. The select committee for educational achievement scrutinises, reviews and advises on the performance against the council's strategic aim of 'continually improving educational achievement'. Documentary evidence considered during the inspection indicates that the scrutiny function is being carried out effectively by members with, in some cases, appropriate requests to officers for more detailed, comparative information on local performance data to be presented.

29. In April 2000, ten area committees were established across the county to enable decision-making at a local level. These area committees have a scrutiny function together with some specific executive functions. Each committee includes an officer from the education and community learning directorate (ECL) whose role is to support the committee on education and related matters. The area committees are still in the early stages of development but some committees have started to focus on data and issues relating to the varying levels of attainment in some parts of the county.

30. ECL is one of four corporate directorates: it has a senior management structure of corporate director and five assistant directors, known as heads of service, who together form the directorate management team (DMT). The assistant directors have responsibility for the areas of inspection and advisory services, inclusion and pupil support, strategic resources, strategic planning and partnership, and lifelong learning.

The Education Development Plan

31. The Education Development Plan provides a sound framework for school improvement across the county. It is based on a thorough audit and analysis of performance from which seven priorities are identified. These priorities reflect appropriately the LEA's strategic objective of continually improving educational achievement and the national agenda:

- improve standards of literacy and numeracy;
- improve capability in information and communication technology and access to it;
- improve performance at GCSE, vocational qualifications and at 16+, where subject performance is weakest;
- improve attainment and progress in science at Key Stage 3;
- improve curriculum planning, teaching organisation and assessment in early years provision;
- improve pupil motivation and behaviour to reduce exclusions and improve attendance; and
- improve the strategic leadership of schools and the monitoring and evaluation of quality and standards by governors, headteachers and senior managers.

32. The plan is clearly written and easy to follow. Activities for special educational needs are woven within the priorities. A local theme is also developed across the priorities through the schools partnership for achievement in Northampton (SPAN), which is developing continuity and progression across the three phases of education in the town. Consultation on the EDP was satisfactory and the DfES approved the plan for three years.

33. Arrangements for the monitoring of the EDP are satisfactory. Most success criteria are clear and measurable. Detailed evaluations of progress are made and a new action plan is produced annually. Details of the current plan are contained in a useful summary document entitled 'The busy person's guide to the EDP'.

34. Targets within the EDP are challenging. Progress against the EDP targets set for 2002 is satisfactory. In 2000, Key Stage 2 results in English (75.3 per cent) were two per cent above the LEA target, but considerable progress is still required to achieve the nine point increase necessary to meet the target set for 2002. Key Stage 2 results in mathematics (70.8 per cent) exceeded the LEA target by two per cent, but a further six points remain to reach the 2002 target. The percentage of pupils gaining five or more A*-C grades at GCSE in 2000 was 48.3 per cent, just above the target set and three points below the 2002 target. The average points score for GCSE in 2000 was just one point below the target set for 2002.

35. Progress towards the targets set for exclusions is good. The number of permanent exclusions, after appeal, in 2000 was only just above the level set for 2002. The level of unauthorised absence in primary schools met the 2000 target, although unauthorised absence in secondary schools was slightly above the target set.

The allocation of resources to priorities

36. The council's allocation of resources to priorities is satisfactory. Corporate three year medium term financial planning is being developed to ensure that overall resources are appropriately matched to priorities. The council's priorities of increasing the money available to schools and increasingly targeting centrally held funding on raising achievement are reflected in the budget planning of the ECL directorate. This commitment to the raising of aspirations and achievement in Northamptonshire is further illustrated by the council's recent allocation of an additional £500,000 for two years to support schools causing concern.

37. Procedures for the delegation of financial responsibility to budget holders are clear and quarterly budget clinics have been introduced recently whereby budget holders report to the corporate management team on the projected outturn of their budget. Budget making is accurate in most respects, although currently there is an overspend on home to school transport. This service is part of the council wide Best Value review (BVR) of transport. Budget difficulties, however, are generally recognised promptly and remedial action is initiated.

38. The proportion of the local schools budget delegated to schools in 2000/01 was high at 87.2 per cent. It was increased further in 2001/02 to 89 per cent compared with a county average of 86.3 per cent. Schools are consulted extensively on budget priorities and the funding formula has been simplified over recent years in response to their comments. The formula contains needs-led allocations within both SEN and repairs and maintenance budgets. However, there is no clear rationale for the larger than average differential between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3.

39. School deficits are acceptably small and controlled but balances held by schools in March 2001 were too large in too many instances. 38 per cent of primary, 38 per cent of special and ten per cent of secondary schools had balances in excess of ten per cent. Mechanisms have recently been established for schools to inform the LEA of their plans for surpluses.

Best Value

40. The structures in place for Best Value and performance management are satisfactory. Northamptonshire was one of the 37 authorities chosen to pilot the government's Best Value approach in April 1998. Lessons have been learned from the pilots. The council has improved the scope of reviews to focus more clearly on outcomes. They have also set up systems to involve councillors more fully. The 2001/02 Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) is the key development document for the council and presents clearly the priorities at council and service levels. A dedicated performance team has been established and performance clinics have

been introduced, whereby service heads report quarterly to the corporate management team against aims, objectives and targets.

41. The ECL directorate has taken part in several Year 1 cross-cutting reviews on social inclusion, ICT, asset management and children looked after, but no education reviews had been completed at the time of the inspection. A Best Value review of school improvement is due to start in autumn 2001, building on the outcomes of this inspection.

42. The council is currently examining the benefits of providing a range of support services through partnership with a private company. This is being undertaken in conjunction with another local authority. The timescale for deciding upon a preferred private sector partner is spring 2002.

43. The LEA's delegation scheme includes a clear statement of Best Value principles and governor training on financial management now includes Best Value. Nevertheless, the implications of Best Value are not widely understood at school level. Although examples of good practice exist, the LEA, until recently, has not been active in assisting schools in procuring services. It has now established a school improvement resource management group, involving headteachers and governors, to consider its procurement role. The directorate also circulates annual financial benchmarking data for schools to make judgements about their own spending patterns in specific areas.

Recommendation:

- provide improved guidance to schools on approaches to Best Value principles.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Implications of other functions

44. A central objective of the county council is to continually improve educational achievement and this has been reflected in the increasing levels of funding for education. The council has provided a strong lead in promoting social inclusion through effective inter-agency partnerships, which in turn are contributing to school improvement. The management services of the LEA are generally well aligned to the school improvement agenda; in particular, the finance and personnel services are responsive to the needs of schools and are providing effective support for headteachers and governing bodies. LEA support for special educational needs and for pupils of minority ethnic heritage is making a significant contribution to school improvement. However, there are some shortcomings in payroll services, in aspects of secondary school admissions and in the effectiveness of the liaison with the social care and health directorate at an operational level.

Monitoring, challenge, support and intervention

45. The LEA's strategy for monitoring, challenge, support and intervention in schools is now satisfactory, but there have been some weaknesses in the LEA's knowledge of schools in the past and in the timeliness of its intervention. The strategy was revised for September 2000, and sets out an appropriate and differentiated approach to contact between the LEA and schools.

46. The annual school performance review is the principal formal contact between the LEA and schools. The school carries out a detailed self-evaluation in advance of the meeting, using good, comprehensive documentation provided by the LEA. Grades on all aspects of school performance and targets are agreed between the headteacher, the chair of governors and the link inspector; and key action points for the future are identified. This process is assisting schools to become self-evaluating, autonomous institutions and provides the LEA with increasingly secure and accurate knowledge of schools.

47. Since September 2000, the revised strategy for monitoring and support has introduced three levels of contact between the link inspector and the school; light touch, medium and high intervention. The agreed outcomes of the annual school performance review provide the main evidence for the determination of the category of contact. The criteria outlining characteristics for each of the three categories have been shared with schools. Nevertheless, not all headteachers are clear about the level that has been determined for their schools and the degree of contact and support that might be expected as a result of being placed in the 'medium' or 'high' category.

Recommendation:

- clarify the process by which the level of LEA contact in a school is determined, and specify the expected levels of contact and support for each of the three categories.

48. Documentation studied during the inspection and visits to schools confirmed that there have been weaknesses in the LEA's knowledge of some schools in the past. However, better quality data is now available within the LEA and is sharpening the challenge presented within the annual school performance review. In the school survey, three-quarters of the schools reported the challenge given to them was satisfactory or better. In the very large majority of schools visited during the inspection, the link inspector provides clear and appropriate challenge and makes an effective contribution to the school's capacity to manage school improvement.

49. The service plan for the Northamptonshire inspection and advisory service (NIAS) sets out the amounts of staff time allocated to Education Development Plan (EDP) and non-EDP work. The hours of link inspector time are calculated on the previous model of three days of contact with each school per year. The costs in the service plan do not yet reflect the differentiated model of contact between link inspectors and their schools in which nearly half of the LEA's schools are identified as requiring a 'light touch'. The three level model of contact therefore presents an opportunity to review and re-direct the use of this key resource for school improvement.

Recommendation:

- review and re-direct the use of link inspector time to fully reflect the differentiated model of contact with schools and their capacity for self-improvement.

50. The LEA retains significant resources of inspector and curriculum adviser time within the EDP to carry out whole school reviews in primary and secondary schools and subject reviews in middle and secondary schools. Whole school reviews are used to research concerns that have been raised by the LEA or the governing body, or to report on progress made in schools causing concern. Although schools value the reviews undertaken by the LEA, those seen during the inspection tended to be uniform in approach and did not always focus specifically on the concerns that had been raised. For subject reviews, the LEA already provides high quality preparatory materials for self-assessment in secondary subject departments. Many schools are sufficiently experienced to conduct subject reviews themselves, with the purchase of consultancy support, if required. The current central funding of reviews does not target resources effectively upon need, and is not consistent with the LEA's commitment to promote school autonomy.

Recommendation:

- ensure that reviews are undertaken only in those schools identified by the LEA and OFSTED as giving cause for concern, and delegate the resources currently held centrally for subject reviews.

51. NIAS is a relatively large service which, until recently, was very heavily involved in obtaining revenue from traded services. Half of the £7.889 million NIAS budget in 2001/02 is secured from LEA resources and the Standards Fund. The purchase of training and consultancy services by schools provides 14 per cent of its budget. A further 36 per cent of its budget is obtained from contracted work, which

enables a wide range of expertise to be held within the team and good links to be maintained with higher education and other agencies. However, schools generally are unaware of the scale of the funding available to NIAS or the use of that funding.

Recommendation:

- provide clear and detailed information on the scale and use of funding within NIAS.

52. There is good data available within NIAS to monitor the work and deployment of its staff. All contacts with a school are recorded and notes of visits provided to the headteacher, who is asked to share these with the chair of governors; many of the governors interviewed during the inspection confirmed that such notes are circulated. Performance management of the service is well supported by staff appraisal, using the service plan, the EDP and professional development targets for focus. The expertise of staff within the service is generally good.

53. The service is managed by the chief education adviser who took up post during the inspection. He has already done a considerable amount of work to analyse and plan the future core work of the service, and in so doing, has demonstrated its capacity for further improvement. This work provides good preparation for the Best Value review of school improvement that is scheduled to commence in September 2001.

Collection and analysis of data

54. The provision of data is satisfactory and improving. Each school is supplied with a school performance profile that includes comparative data on performance, finance, and premises. Minority ethnic attainment data is available for the first time in 2001. A useful performance summary is provided that sets out examination and test results for the school alongside its targets and identifies any significant gender differences. A new value added measure for pupils between Key Stages 3 and 4 has been produced in 2001, which is valued by the schools. There is some duplication in the data supplied to schools that is already available to them from national sources, but this data is also provided for the monitoring work of link inspectors and other LEA staff. A calendar for information exchange is currently out for consultation with headteachers.

55. The LEA identifies a target range for the performance of each school with an element of challenge built within it. This is a satisfactory approach, although headteachers are generally not aware of the method of injecting this challenge and its scale. The LEA is working with the Education Action Zone (EAZ) in Corby to identify the additional targets required from schools in the zone; that additional challenge is not yet reflected in the overall published targets for the LEA.

Recommendation:

- ensure that headteachers are aware of the method of adding challenge within the LEA target range for each school.

56. There is considerable potential for the further development of data and target-setting presented by the new central pupil database, due to come into operation in the autumn term 2001. This database will enable the attainment and progress of individual pupils and cohorts to be tracked and schools will therefore be able to receive data on the cohorts of pupils admitted. As a result, the degree of challenge presented both by schools and the LEA can be further sharpened. The sharing of cohort data electronically for target-setting and pupil tracking has already been piloted successfully within the SPAN project in Northampton schools, using cognitive ability test (CAT) data.

57. In the school survey, virtually all primary schools and three-quarters of secondary schools reported that the quality of data is satisfactory or better. Over two-thirds of schools were satisfied with the guidance on the use of the data. From interviews and school visits, it is clear that there has been a recent and significant improvement in the provision and quality of data. In the schools visited, there were several examples noted of good assistance provided to staff by link inspectors on the analysis and application of data for school improvement.

Support for literacy

58. Support for literacy is satisfactory. Test results at the end of Key Stage 2 are broadly in line with the national average at 75 per cent, but the rate of improvement is below the national trend. Although this result was better than the LEA target of 73 per cent, considerable progress will be needed to achieve the target of 84 per cent for 2002. At Key Stage 3, 62.5 per cent of pupils achieved Level 5 and above in English, close to the national figure of 63 per cent, but below that of the LEA's statistical neighbours. The rate of improvement, however, is below the national trend and that of the LEA's statistical neighbours. Standards have risen at a higher rate in primary schools in the intensive group than in other Northamptonshire schools.

59. The LEA monitors data from schools, identifies low attainment and generally targets support well at identified needs. Sixty schools have received intensive support for literacy. Literacy co-ordinators have received effective support in lesson observation skills, analysis of data and planning. Support for pupils' writing has improved teachers' confidence and pupils' learning. Introductory training for the National Literacy Strategy (NLS), however, did not adequately cover the needs of minority ethnic pupils or those with special educational needs.

60. The LEA has facilitated the sharing of good practice through the primary literacy co-ordinators networks, secondary heads of English and the primary headteachers' forum. Newsletters and published material help keep all schools informed of developments and disseminate good practice. The associate teacher programme enabled primary and secondary teachers to observe the teaching of literacy.

61. The primary literacy team is well managed and has a good range of expertise enhanced by the appointment of primary and secondary consultants with recent classroom experience. New consultants have an appropriate induction programme. Liaison with other teams, such as school link inspectors and the multicultural education team is effective. Primary link inspectors have monitored the

implementation of the NLS through a focus on teaching and learning, and management. A recent audit of teaching writing has helped identify successful practice and highlight aspects for improvement.

62. Support for literacy at Key Stage 3 is at an early stage of development with introductory five-day courses for key members of staff scheduled for the second half of the summer term. Schools for the first Key Stage 3 cohort have been identified and are due to start in September. Planned training focuses appropriately on improving literacy levels of low-attaining groups, whole school literacy and continuity and progression between Key Stage 2 and 3. There are good arrangements for the transfer of electronic data between schools which aid planning. This year, twenty summer schools are planned to help raise standards and improve progression.

Support for numeracy

63. Support for numeracy is satisfactory. In 2000, 70 per cent of pupils in Key Stage 2 achieved Level 4 and above in mathematics. This figure is broadly in line with the national average but the rate of improvement over the last three years is well below the national trend. Significant improvement is needed to achieve the target of 76 per cent by 2002. The LEA has made an appropriate response by identifying areas of underachievement and initiating projects to raise standards. At Key Stage 3, 67 per cent of pupils achieved Level 5 and above, which is broadly in line with the national average. The rate of improvement is also in line with the national trend.

64. Overall, the National Numeracy Strategy (NNS) has been well managed. Seventy-two schools have received intensive support since 1999, and their results improved faster than the county average. Initial training did not sufficiently cover teaching minority ethnic pupils and those with special educational needs; this is being addressed. Demonstration lessons and classroom observation have helped improve teaching. Numeracy co-ordinators have received effective support for the assessment of pupils' work, data analysis, planning and resources. Booster classes have raised standards and bridging units have prepared pupils for Key Stage 3.

65. There are good networks of support for primary numeracy co-ordinators. Secondary conferences are held for heads of mathematics. Cluster groups comprising teachers from across key stages also meet to focus on local issues. Leading mathematics teachers have shared good practice with visiting teachers and helped produce teaching materials.

66. The size of the mathematics team has increased to accommodate the demands of the NNS. Consultants have helped improve the quality of teaching and use of resources in schools. However, some training and support in three of the intensive primary schools have been handled insensitively, resulting in teachers lacking confidence in the support offered to them.

67. Primary link inspectors are routinely involved in monitoring the NNS and target-setting as part of their focused visits to schools. The outcomes are fed back to the school and the LEA and used to inform future work. In secondary schools,

support has been effectively targeted where mathematics has been identified as an area for concern.

68. Plans for the introduction of the NNS in Key Stage 3 are well in hand. Twenty-four schools are in the first phase of intensive support and training for all schools is available.

Support for information and communication technology (ICT)

69. Support for the use of ICT in the curriculum and for administrative uses is satisfactory overall. The strategy for ICT is to develop learning through ICT and suitable activities are set out to achieve this in the Educational Development Plan. Targets have been set for ICT attainment at each key stage; data suggests that attainment at Key Stages 1 and 3 is above national targets and is slightly below at Key Stage 2.

70. There is a satisfactory ICT development plan. The LEA has asked schools to produce ICT development plans and provided them with clear guidance. Examples of ICT development plans are shown on the council's web site. Ninety-five per cent of schools have had their ICT plans approved. A very useful and accessible article for governors on ICT and school improvement was provided in the spring 2000 edition of the 'Northamptonshire Governor' newsletter.

71. There has been a high level of demand for curriculum support and in-service training for ICT, especially for training linked to literacy and numeracy. Some difficulties in recruiting suitable staff to provide the support have been experienced. Eighty-seven per cent of course evaluations rate the support as good or better. Over three-quarters of schools have now arranged training with New Opportunities Funding (NOF).

72. The LEA has a target to provide all schools with faster internet connections by August 2002. All schools have received some support through funding for the National Grid for Learning (NGfL). All schools are connected to the internet and each primary school has at least three machines networked, including administrative and curriculum. The LEA has good data on the availability of equipment in schools, and future NGfL funding is to be used to help schools to meet the 2002 national targets for the ratio of computers to pupils. Some funding is also available to support schools in developing innovative uses of ICT.

73. In the school survey, three-quarters of primary schools and two-thirds of secondary schools reported that support for the ICT in the curriculum was satisfactory or better, although one-third of secondary schools rated support as poor. Visits to schools showed that curriculum support for ICT has improved in recent months.

74. In the school survey, ICT in school administration was deemed to be poor and in the lowest 25 per cent of LEAs inspected. However, there are recent improvements and the service is now satisfactory. There have been difficulties in establishing a service that brought together support for curriculum and administrative systems. Following consultation with headteachers, a detailed action plan was

agreed, including measurable outcomes to which the service is working. Most schools purchase the service level agreement, and a significant number visited during the inspection commented on the recent improvement in technical and administrative support. The helpdesk and the technicians' work schedules have been re-organised successfully.

75. The education and community learning (ECL) directorate has a clear strategy for meeting the e-government agenda. During autumn 2000, the information management and research service (IMRS) was established to develop information systems and to co-ordinate and provide management information. It is producing an information management strategy that includes procedures to control requests for information going to schools, an e-mail protocol and an information calendar. The authority's web pages are well-structured, informative and easy to use. The common basic data set is being developed.

Support for schools causing concern

76. The overall support for schools causing concern is unsatisfactory. There are weaknesses in the LEA's identification process; in the timeliness of its intervention; and in the support for weaknesses, relating to leadership and management. Once a school has been identified as requiring special measures or having serious weaknesses, LEA support has been generally good and effective.

77. Currently, there are three schools (two primary schools and one middle school) in special measures and six schools (four primary schools, one special school and one secondary school) with serious weaknesses. Since 1998, two primary schools, three middle schools, and one special school have been removed from special measures; and one special school, two middle and seven primary schools no longer have serious weaknesses. Two secondary schools in special measures were closed and re-opened as a 'Fresh Start' school in 2000; this school remains on the list of schools causing concern to the LEA. There are 26 schools (21 primary schools, two middle schools and three secondary schools) on the list of schools causing concern to the LEA and which receive additional support. The overall proportion of schools identified as causing concern is in line with the national average.

78. The LEA has set a target of achieving no schools in special measures by 2003 and no schools with serious weaknesses by 2005. To help meet this target, an additional budget of £0.5million has been provided for each of two years for specific support to schools causing concern. This funding is to meet the staffing costs of secondments to senior management posts in these schools; additional financial and personnel support; the provision of better management data; and support for inclusion in the schools. Some of the funding will be devolved to schools against an agreed action plan, from which they will be able to purchase additional support services. This is a very significant financial commitment by the council for which clear progress will need to be demonstrated. Its impact will depend upon the degree to which the LEA is able to identify problems sufficiently early and take timely action to address them.

Recommendation:

- set clear medium term targets by which progress in reducing the number of schools causing concern can be judged.

79. The LEA has provided satisfactory monitoring and support for schools requiring special measures, with additional governors appointed where required. Schools have been removed from special measures within the time targeted. In two schools studied during the inspection however, knowledge of the school by the LEA had not been sufficiently strong. In others, whilst the issues have been identified, the LEA has not taken action sufficiently early to avoid further deterioration. Support for all schools causing concern is negotiated individually through an action plan. LEA support is effective in dealing with weaknesses in standards and the curriculum, but LEA support for weaknesses in leadership, management and governance has not always been sufficient or effective.

80. Satisfactory reports on schools causing concern are provided for the directorate management team and senior elected members. A welcome and timely development is the establishment in April 2001 of a school intervention group, which will enable the directorate to identify and monitor schools causing concern, drawing on expertise and information from all sections of the LEA.

Recommendation:

- use the wide evidence available from across the education and community learning directorate to ensure sharp, rigorous and timely support and action are taken to prevent any further deterioration in schools causing concern.

Support for governors

81. Support for governors overall is satisfactory, but there are some weaknesses in the co-ordination of support and the filling of vacancies. These weaknesses were reflected in the response to the school survey where three-quarters of the schools reported support to be satisfactory or better, but one-fifth reported it to be poor.

82. Development of the management and strategic role of governors is given a high priority within the Education Development Plan. The LEA undertakes routine monitoring of governing body minutes. A skills audit of governor effectiveness has been particularly well received; 200 school governing bodies have now undertaken this audit to help identify their needs in carrying out their strategic role.

83. At the time of the inspection, 18.1 per cent of LEA nominations to governing bodies were vacant. The policy at the time of the inspection allows a school's governing body to nominate a governor for a vacant LEA place after six months. This is too long and hinders the capacity of the governing body to provide the necessary strategic management leadership within the school. The LEA is aware of this and a recommendation from the education achievement select committee that the six month period be waived is awaiting cabinet approval. The EDP gives a target to reduce vacancies of over six months to zero. An appropriate recruitment strategy was launched in January 2001, targeting all county council employees, placing

newspaper advertisements and working with minority ethnic groups to increase the number of governors.

84. Consultation with governors is sound and takes place through the county governors' advisory group, the association of Northamptonshire school governing bodies and other meetings between officers and governors.

85. The governor services unit (GSU) has clear and appropriate objectives set out in its service plan. Liaison between the service and Northampton Inspection and Advisory Service (NIAS) has been strengthened by the appointment of a link inspector with governance as a responsibility. The service provides a good range of information to governors. A clerking service is offered under a service level agreement. The service has experienced recruitment difficulties and, at the time of the inspection, a third advertisement for a unit manager was being run.

86. A wide range of training is provided which governors report to be satisfactory, with a more positive response received for school-based courses. As a result, the GSU is developing a panel of associate trainers to enable more school-based support to be provided.

87. In 2000, the LEA commissioned a detailed review of the service from the community education development centre. A wide range of recommendations were made, including strengthening the advisory group's role and ensuring that the ECL directorate provides a common message to governing bodies. The inspection identified a small number of schools where support for management and governance has either been insufficient or ineffective, and there has been variability in the speed with which services from across the LEA have responded. Action and support provided across a range of services is not always sufficiently co-ordinated.

Recommendation:

- put in place the mechanisms to co-ordinate support to a governing body from all services across the LEA.

Support for school management

88. Support for school management is satisfactory and has a number of strengths. Inspection data indicate that the percentage of Northamptonshire schools judged to be good or very good in management and efficiency is above that found in similar authorities and nationally.

89. Link inspectors provide effective challenge and support to school management. In the schools visited, there are several good examples of the link inspectors working with staff to develop classroom observation skills, supporting the high priority given by the LEA to school self-review. The materials provided by the LEA for whole school and subject reviews are of good quality. The autonomy of many schools and the skills of senior and middle managers have been advanced through the use of this review material and the training for self-review provided.

90. Support for headteachers and senior managers is sound. There are regular meetings between headteachers and senior officers of the LEA and opportunities for headteachers to contribute to LEA working parties. NIAS is the lead authority in the East Midlands region for the National Professional Qualification for Headteachers (NPQH) and it is involved in the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers (LPSH). Formal mentoring of new headteachers, however, was begun relatively late in April 2001. There is a good course for aspiring deputy heads which has been well received. Middle management training has been focused on science; in 2001/02, training is being extended to middle managers in English and mathematics.

91. There is a wide and high quality professional development and consultancy programme provided by NIAS through a buy-back arrangement. The comprehensive programme, linked to Education Development Plan priorities, is published and is also available on the council web site. Curriculum teams work to an annual development plan and income targets. Brokering of alternative services is underdeveloped and is undertaken only when expertise is not available within the team and the alternative source is known and tried. The LEA provides effective school-based training delivered by NIAS staff to a specification produced by the school. Support for newly qualified teachers (NQT) is good. There is a sound range of in-service training for NQTs and their mentors.

92. The LEA provides appropriate support to the standing advisory council on religious education (SACRE), including analysis of OFSTED inspection reports, and has produced some good support documentation on religious education (RE) for schools. The agreed syllabus for RE was revised in 1999.

93. The LEA, through its link inspectors and curriculum advisers, has good knowledge of the sources of good practice within its schools. There are examples of good practice reported in newsletters, but it is not routinely disseminated to all schools. There are a number of specialist and Beacon schools in the LEA, yet there is no co-ordinated plan to work with all these schools towards a programme for school improvement and professional development.

Recommendation:

- develop with schools a co-ordinated plan to ensure that good practice is disseminated effectively across all schools.

Support for early years education

94. Support for early years education is good. The LEA has a coherent strategy for developing early years provision that includes ensuring sufficient places and developing the quality of provision. Key plans are effectively linked together. Good progress is being made on the EDP priority to improve knowledge and understanding of the early years curriculum including that for pupils with special educational needs.

95. The LEA has brought together an effective early years development and childcare partnership drawn from a wide range of maintained, voluntary and private groups. The partnership is well placed to meet the needs of local communities through its structure of area committees and functional committees. An aim of the

partnership is to place more provision on school sites in deprived areas to facilitate wrap around care covering pre-school and after school care. Two Sure Start programmes have been established and an early excellence centre is a key player in the current focus on parental involvement in their child's learning.

96. A very thorough audit of provision informed the Early Years Development and Childcare Plan (EYDCP). There are sufficient places in LEA, independent, voluntary or private early years settings for all four year-olds to receive one year of part-time education. The number of places in voluntary and private sector settings registered with the EYDCP will enable the LEA to meet its target for three year-olds.

97. The partnership is a strongly independent body that works productively with LEA support services. Members of the LEA early years inspection and advisory team work closely with the partnership. Support to settings is well targeted through the analysis of OFSTED inspections and annual self-reviews. The emphasis is, rightly, on raising the quality of provision in all settings through accredited training. An important priority for maintained and non-maintained sectors has been curriculum planning and assessment for the foundation stage.

98. The LEA has made good use of the effective early learning project. 80 schools and four settings have been involved. The project has a strong focus on self-evaluation and has been particularly successful in schools with pupils from ethnic minorities.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate planning

99. Corporate planning is good. The overall purpose of the council is 'to achieve sustainable improvements in the economic, social and environmental well-being' of citizens. To achieve this purpose, six strategic aims have been identified, including 'continually improving educational achievement'. These strategic aims are fully reflected in the Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) 2001/02 which is the major corporate planning document for the council.

100. The education elements within the BVPP are clearly presented, well argued and linked to targets in the major plans within the education and community learning (ECL) directorate, most notably the EDP; and where appropriate, related to plans in other directorates, such as the children's services plan. The BVPP is a coherent and accessible document that reflects the needs of the education service and the associated actions which will be taken. Responsibilities for achieving the targets along with key performance indicators are clearly set out and members of the public are actively encouraged to comment on and respond to the plan

101. Extensive public consultation has underpinned the corporate planning processes for a number of years. Some issues, such as the public's satisfaction with local schools, have been followed up by the council's public opinion surveys and the outcomes used to set future targets for the education service. The council has mapped out a clear programme for the development of the community plan by March 2002, which will link to the BVPP for 2002/03.

102. Planning processes are securely established within the ECL directorate and ensure that service plans are directly linked to the corporate priorities within the BVPP. A 'strategic framework for education and community learning' sets out the vision for education, and links the council's aims and objectives with service and statutory plans. The first strategic framework published in 1999 highlighted not only the need for consultation and partnership working to support the aim of continuous improvement, but also the need at times to intervene directly in order to secure improvements. The most recent framework, published in December 2000, sets out clearly the values of the directorate and the key objectives for the education service.

103. The chief executive has emphasised the need for a sharper focus on performance management across the council. Regular performance and budget clinics have been introduced for heads of services and involve members of the corporate management team. Within the ECL directorate, progress on service plans is reviewed on a six-monthly cycle and budget-holders meet with the directorate management team (DMT) on a quarterly basis. Performance management is sound, and stronger links are beginning to be established between corporate priorities, service plans and individual performance targets. The ECL directorate has achieved Investor in People status.

104. Political leadership of the LEA is good. Elected members carry out their strategic responsibilities well and have a clear understanding of the issues facing the education service. Key decisions facing the authority, such as the review of schools

in Northampton, have received cross-party support. Members receive good advice from officers in most cases and will, when necessary, request further information, especially regarding schools' performance. Members exercise their scrutiny function effectively. There are close and effective working relationships between members and senior officers of the LEA.

105. The quality of leadership given by the corporate director and senior officers is good. There is clarity of vision with school improvement at its heart, a strong commitment to working in partnership with schools and a determination to raise standards across the authority. The directorate management team has demonstrated the ability to manage change effectively, particularly in the major reviews of lifelong learning and pupil inclusion. The LEA's senior managers have the capacity and capability to deliver the necessary improvements for the service.

106. There are effective structures for consultation with schools. Consultation groups of representative headteachers and governors exist for both local management of schools (LMS) and the Standards Fund. Schools receive helpful budget information well before the start of the financial year, including final budgets at the end of February. In autumn 1999, the Northamptonshire partnership promise was formally agreed, linking schools and the council directly in the shared priority of maximising achievement. Major targets within the Promise have been achieved; education budgets have been above SSA, and EDP targets have been achieved. Partnership commitments agreed with headteachers are also incorporated into the objectives of the strategic framework for education.

Partnership

107. The council, including the ECL directorate, has a strong commitment to partnership working as key to securing continuous improvement, and has acquired a wide range of practice and expertise. The LEA has taken a lead role in a number of partnerships at county and regional levels, for example the lifelong learning partnership and in developing Connexions. A newstart partnership has been effectively established to tackle issues of pupil disaffection at Key Stage 4, which has attracted additional funding from the European Social Fund. The LEA has been an active participant in the development of the learning and skills council. There are good links with institutions of higher education which have resulted in a range of accredited training for teaching and support staff. Close working relationships exist between the LEA and dioceses.

108. The schools partnership for achievement in Northampton (SPAN) project was established in autumn 1999. The project aims to improve continuity and progression across the three phases of schooling in Northampton and has included 'playing for success', a project funded through the Standards Fund, and based on three sporting centres in the town.

109. Liaison with the health authority and the police results in good joint working with schools. Community police officers contribute to the citizenship curriculum and are involved in preventative work in schools to combat drug abuse and crime. Strategic liaison with the social care and health directorate is effective. However, at the school level, liaison with social workers is variable, and schools rated it as

unsatisfactory in the school survey. There are few opportunities for school staff and social workers to develop better mutual understanding about their respective roles.

Recommendation:

- investigate further how liaison between schools, the education and community learning directorate and the social care and health directorate can be improved and thereby ensure a clear understanding of the respective roles and responsibilities.

110. Working relations between the LEA and the Education Action Zone (EAZ) in Corby are cordial, generally effective, but not close. The corporate director and a senior education officer are members of the strategic planning group of the EAZ. A group of link inspectors for schools in the EAZ meet on a regular basis with the EAZ director, but the outcomes are variable. For example, there is no joint work on target-setting in Zone schools. Links with the LEA are stronger at the primary level where one of the link inspectors has clearly dedicated time for collaborative work with the EAZ. There are also several examples of good joint working on specific projects funded by the EAZ. However, the synergy that could be generated by a more effective partnership between the LEA and EAZ has not been fully realised.

Management services

111. The quality of management services is satisfactory. Clear and appropriate information on traded services is provided for schools in a consistent format. All the main services offer several levels of provision including a 'pay as you use' option but the booklets do not contain information on non-traded services, nor alternative providers. However, a working group of headteachers and officers has recently been established to consider schools' procurement role and the type and format of information they require.

Recommendation:

- ensure that information on LEA services includes details of non-traded services and information about alternative providers.

112. The LEA consults via representative groups and circulates an annual survey to judge schools' satisfaction with individual services. Although the survey helpfully provides an overview of services, it is too vague to inform service improvement and lacks rigour. The level of buy-back is generally high, especially in the areas of personnel and finance.

113. The **financial support** service in Northamptonshire is sound and well regarded by schools. It is responsive, efficient and officers have a close-working relationship with schools. It provides effective monitoring of both the education directorate and schools' budgets. The school survey and visits confirmed that schools justifiably recognise the quality of this service. However, although the service has recently required schools to submit budget plans for surpluses, insufficient work was done in the past to encourage schools that have excessive surpluses to commit their budget. Internal audit works well as an integral part of the financial service. Communications with schools are clear and precise.

114. The **payroll service** offered to schools is unsatisfactory. Payroll services for the schools and council were contracted out in June 1998 and the client function is handled corporately through a payroll client officer and the county finance officer. The authority accepts that the service provided to schools from the inception of the contract was poor. There has been some improvement, but there are still too many errors and too long a delay in payment for some staff.

Recommendation:

- Establish mechanisms whereby the payroll service to schools provides the timely and error free service required.

115. **Personnel support** is good and highly regarded by schools. It was rated in the top quartile of LEAs surveyed. Particular strengths are in the exercise of its casework function and the management and organisational support it offers to schools. Its manual of personnel practice and policies is comprehensive and up-to-date. In response to requests from headteachers, the service has appropriately developed a variety of detailed recruitment and retention strategies into which schools can buy. The LEA has worked in partnership with a private provider to develop an innovative on-line advertising and recruitment package which also incorporates a regularly updated supply teacher database. Work is continuing on surveying area trends in recruitment and retention, working with local communities to attract minority ethnic groups to the teaching profession and on accreditation for the LEA's graduate recruitment scheme.

116. **Property services** to schools are generally satisfactory. Building maintenance is conducted jointly with schools through a combination of strategic programmes of repair and maintenance and a centrally managed maintenance fund in which two-thirds of primary and special schools participate. The service has in the past been mainly reactive, but there is now in place a two-year plan to complete prioritised work utilising the asset management plan's condition survey. A property management handbook is produced for schools in which there is comprehensive advice on contract management.

117. There are well-established systems for **contracting services for ground maintenance and caretaking** and cleaning. Both services were rated by schools to be in the top 25 per cent of LEAs inspected.

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Strategy

118. The LEA's strategy for special educational needs (SEN) is good and reflects the national agenda. The LEA has a clear interim policy for SEN that fully explains provision, responsibilities, funding and monitoring. This policy will be finalised once the outcomes of the current review of special schools and the designated special provisions (DSP) attached to mainstream schools, and the revisions to the SEN Code of Practice are known.

119. Schools are clear about the LEA's policy and strategy for achieving SEN objectives. In particular, the LEA's commitment to the key principle of inclusion is widely recognised and shared by schools. The aim is to educate children in their local mainstream school, but the LEA recognises that there will be a need to increase the amount of DSP provision accordingly. The principle of inclusion is firmly stated in the Education Development Plan and SEN elements are woven throughout the priorities.

120. A comprehensive and well-argued inclusion strategy statement, published in spring 2001, provides more detail on how the LEA plans to move forward on the process of inclusion and the progress which has already been made. The LEA has embarked on a strategic approach to address the broad issues of inclusion, and in so doing, has established an inclusion and pupil support (IPS) division within the ECL directorate. Following extensive consultation with key stakeholders in spring 2000, the LEA has been given broad endorsement for its strategic approach which brings together SEN, social inclusion and minority ethnic attainment under a common framework.

121. In order to promote inclusive practice, support services have been reorganised into four area IPS teams which include educational psychologists, behaviour management teams, support teacher teams, education welfare officers, and EMTAG teams. This area structure has recently become operational and provides a co-ordinated service for schools and pupils. IPS have issued a directory of services to schools which will be followed in September by a handbook detailing the quantity, level and type of support schools can expect to receive. Schools are positive about these developments and are able to access support appropriately. However, it is still too early to judge the impact of these new arrangements.

Statutory obligations

122. The LEA takes effective steps to fulfil its statutory responsibilities for SEN. The LEA acknowledges that improvement is needed in the time taken for the completion of statutory assessment, and the introduction of a data-checking system is enabling officers to identify specific problems, such as medical delays. The number of statements completed within the time limits set by national guidelines has risen from 84 to 86 per cent with exceptions, and from 72 to 77 per cent for those without exceptions.

Recommendation:

- identify ways in which to reduce the timescale taken for statutory assessment.

123. Special needs assessment panels (SNAPs) have been established in each area. Chaired by the deputy area co-ordinators, they use agreed criteria to provide consistency in decision-making across the county. Funding levels for statements are formula based on arrangements to meet need. Pre-school teachers take part in initial assessment and ensure early identification of pupils with SEN. Currently, the formal moderation system of decisions regarding the issuing of statements does not involve headteachers or special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs).

Recommendation:

- establish ways in which headteachers and special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) can be involved in the decision-making process for statutory assessment.

124. Recent changes to funding are helping schools to provide additional targeted support at stage 3 of the Code of Practice, rather than request a formal assessment. The impact has been significant. In 2000/01, the LEA issued 77 fewer statements than in previous years. The LEA continues to provide funding for pupils who still need support when their statement ceases; officers are reviewing the criteria for de-statementing.

125. The quality of statements is good. The LEA monitors all annual reviews and responds to necessary amendments. LEA representation at annual and transition reviews is available if requested by the school. The majority of the schools visited during the inspection are satisfied with the support provided for the review process.

126. The parent/partnership service is well developed and provides valuable support in guiding parents through the system. This is contributing to a reduction in appeals reaching the tribunal stage. Information about the service is widely available. The comprehensive handbook for parents on SEN is particularly impressive and provides useful advice on preparation for assessment contribution and annual reviews.

Improvement and value for money

127. The annual SEN audit provides an effective mechanism for reviewing the match between funding in schools and the levels of need. From September 2001, schools will be required to demonstrate the outcomes of additional funding, without having the level and type of support specified. This should enable the LEA to monitor, more effectively, the impact of support without making the process of accountability too bureaucratic or inflexible for schools to manage.

128. SEN provision and support have undergone significant reorganisation in recent months, and the process is only now complete. Schools are beginning to see the benefits of the inclusion and pupil support (IPS) structure which integrates all aspects of SEN administration and support. Support teachers from IPS are highly regarded and provide good quality, flexible support, training and advice for special

educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs), headteachers and other school staff. The educational psychology service provides generally good support, although recruitment difficulties have resulted in problems for some schools. In all except one of the schools visited for the inspection, support for SEN was at least satisfactory; in half, it was judged to be good.

129. The special school and designated special provisions (DSP) review will have far-reaching implications for mainstream schools. The LEA has recognised the need for further training and support for school staff and LEA advisory staff in order to implement these changes. An SEN inspector has been appointed who works across inclusion and pupil support (IPS) and Northampton inspection and advisory service (NIAS) with a small team of SEN inspectors. They work largely in special schools and DSPs and, together with educational psychologists, monitor the quality of provision. Currently, link inspectors in mainstream schools do not have the expertise to monitor the quality of provision in DSPs and support teachers from IPS do not work with statemented pupils. DSPs are a key element within the LEA's strategy to increase inclusion, but the current monitoring and support arrangements are not sufficient.

Recommendation:

- ensure that link inspectors have the expertise necessary to advise and monitor the quality of provision on a regular basis.

130. The network of support and training for SENCOs is highly regarded by schools. An annual conference includes speakers of national repute, but there is concern expressed by several SENCOs and headteachers that places are limited and not all schools can be represented. There is guidance provided on many aspects of SEN provision and training on the revised Code of Practice has been developed in partnership with the University College Northampton. Training for advisers and inspectors is still in its early days, but is recognised by the LEA as essential in order for them to support inclusive practice and to monitor the progress of pupils with increasingly complex needs in mainstream schools.

131. Northamptonshire's overall expenditure on special educational needs as a percentage of the local schools' budget is in line with the average for English counties. Central expenditure of £90 per pupil is significantly lower than the county average of £147 which reflects the high level of delegation to schools. Funding arrangements under the banding system are clearly established and ensure that support is provided for pupils with special educational needs. The proposed changes to the SEN audit will enable the LEA to evaluate more accurately the effectiveness with which delegated funds are used. The overall budget is generally well controlled and is not overspent. The LEA provides good value for money.

SECTION 5: ACCESS

The supply of school places

132. Overall, the management of school places is satisfactory. School organisation is a significant issue in the LEA where there is a variety of two and three-tier provision. Northamptonshire has a clear school organisation plan (SOP) for 2001/06 and an effective school organisation committee. The class size plan has been implemented in line with requirements.

133. The LEA has acted on the recommendations in the recent external audit report. It now consults with schools and other agencies on pupil projections and is in the process of developing a computerised mapping system of children by postcode to aid forecasting. The LEA is aiming, as a result of decisions now being made, to reduce the proportion of primary surplus places to eight per cent and secondary surplus places to 6.25 per cent by 2004/05. Good progress is being made towards these targets.

134. The LEA is carrying out effectively the major review of provision within Northampton, changing from a three tier to a two tier system. It has been less successful and slow however, in resolving difficulties with the provision of secondary places in a town where the LEA is not the admissions authority. As a result, the LEA has set in place a programme of meetings with local headteachers to share the outcomes of pupil forecasting and to jointly plan for additional short-term need.

Admissions

135. Overall, admissions arrangements are satisfactory and provide good value for money. The service handles well the complexities caused by the mixture of provision across the county and the number of admission authorities. However, there have been some difficulties. Problems in one town in the county were exacerbated by the failure of the LEA to track pupils sufficiently and by its ineffective co-ordination of the admissions process for the foundation secondary schools in the area. This resulted in children being without a school place for an unacceptable period.

Recommendation:

- work with headteachers in areas of the county facing problems to ensure that admissions arrangements are co-ordinated effectively.

136. In general, the operation of the admissions criteria for oversubscribed schools results in the fair and equitable allocation of school places. The LEA has effectively supported the admissions forums and has made submissions to the adjudicator to challenge possible sources of unfairness in admissions. Performance indicators for satisfying parental preference are in line with comparators. Information for parents is well presented, with most complex issues clearly explained. The appeals process complies with legislation and is carried out in a satisfactory and timely manner. A working group of officers has identified those areas, such as the application of distance criteria, which require further detail and are appropriately carrying out an in-depth review of procedures to inform future practice.

Asset management planning

137. Northamptonshire has made satisfactory progress in developing its asset management plan (AMP). It has undertaken condition and suitability surveys on all of its schools using internal and contracted staff and the outcomes have been shared with schools. Detailed consultation takes place with the asset management consultative group comprising headteacher, governor and diocesan representatives. The outcomes of the surveys are held on a commercially developed database and will be on the web in the near future.

138. The LEA's process for challenging and monitoring schools' plans for maintenance and their use of capital allocations aligned to the priorities in the asset management plan are not sufficiently robust. The LEA currently asks schools to return an assessment management plan (AMP) monitoring form, spot checks ten per cent of schools annually and seeks an annual response from schools on their condition survey. Although two-thirds of primary and special schools buy into central management of strategic repairs and maintenance, schools do not automatically receive regular visits from specialist property officers. However, the LEA uses appropriately a needs-targeted approach to the delegation of repairs and maintenance funds to schools and encourages schools to produce a five-year premises development plan. The ECL directorate is currently in the process of finalising a service level agreement with the county property services which will contain service standards and aspirations, as well as a clearer definition of the service to be received.

Recommendation:

- strengthen the process for monitoring schools' maintenance of their buildings and their spend against priorities in the asset management plan.

139. There has been a significant increase over recent years in capital allocations. A Private Finance Initiative partnership to establish new primary and secondary school places south of Northampton has received treasury credit approval. In other areas, partnering projects are being investigated. Although there has been recent improvement in building stock, there remains a maintenance backlog. Officers will report to members in autumn 2001 on the long-term plan for the removal of approximately 250 mobile classrooms in the county.

Provision of education otherwise than at school

140. Provision for pupils educated other than at school is satisfactory overall and improving. It has been reviewed and restructured as part of the LEA's strategy for social inclusion. Six former pupil referral units have been restructured into a complementary education service. This provision is now the responsibility of a head of complementary education, line managed by the senior education officer for social inclusion.

141. A wide range of provision is available including, four complementary education centres (CECs) for permanently excluded pupils, two centres for pregnant school girls as well as hospital education, individual tutors and an officer to monitor children educated at home. The CECs are intended to assist schools with support to

prevent exclusion as well as provision for pupils excluded for more than 15 days and permanently.

142. The quality of provision for pupils with CEC places is good and the majority receives more than eighteen hours per week. Currently, the LEA is not able to meet government targets for full-time provision for all permanently excluded pupils and for those excluded for more than fifteen days. The LEA is planning a range of options to address this issue, including increasing provision. The LEA maintains a comprehensive and up-to-date pupil database. Pupils not placed in centres for reasons of illness, emotional or complex special needs are provided with appropriate individual tuition. Of these, some are very difficult to place pupils who have been excluded from emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) special schools out of county.

143. Attendance at CECs is good. Pupils respond well to the good teaching and make good progress at GCSE. Links with further education (FE) colleges are strong and good use is made of FE courses, with additional support from CEC staff. Pupils receive valuable advice and support from careers advisers.

144. Referral procedures for complementary education are changing. It is proposed that by September 2001, all referrals will go through area-based pupil placement panels. Currently pilots are operating in two areas of the county. The panels are managed by headteachers and supported by IPS staff and area education officers. This is a sensible arrangement but it is too early to judge the impact of these changes. Comprehensive arrangements for the referral of sick children and pregnant schoolgirls are in place. There are good working relationships between the education welfare service (EWS), social services, the youth offending team, and the health authorities.

Attendance

145. Overall, support for attendance is good following an external review and a re-focusing of the EWS. Attendance rates are better than national averages, but less than statistical neighbours. Unauthorised absence in the primary sector is steadily declining and is in line to meet the target in the EDP. In the secondary sector, unauthorised absence is below the national average. Although the rate is static, the EDP target is unlikely to be met.

146. The principal education welfare officer monitors attendance school-by-school regularly, and targets the work of senior education welfare officers (EWO) effectively on those schools with the most need. This approach has been accepted, in principle, by schools. The strategy has successfully reduced schools where attendance is a cause for concern from 15 to seven. Schools are encouraged to employ an education welfare assistant to monitor attendance and to follow up absences. Officers have advised schools on systems for managing attendance, including first day follow-up, monitoring of registers and the use of home-school liaison officers. EWOs have also continued casework with pupils and their families.

147. Good use has been made of data to identify the reasons for non-attendance. Much work has been done in minority ethnic communities by pre-school officers to

promote the importance of punctuality and regular attendance. Bilingual support assistants have encouraged parents from ethnic minorities to ensure their children attend. Pupil advocates have helped minority ethnic pupils and their parents raise and address attendance issues with schools.

148. The Police, youth offending team and the EWS have developed protocols for truancy sweeps and engage in effective joint working. The LEA has made use of its legal powers when necessary, but a review revealed that attendance did not improve as a result of prosecution. The EWS has since revised its approach and is appropriately putting more effort into preventative work and in finding alternative educational provision.

Behaviour support

149. Overall, the LEA gives satisfactory support in promoting good behaviour and has achieved some success in reducing the levels of exclusion. The permanent exclusion rate is below the national figure for primary schools and broadly in line with the figure for secondary schools. Levels of fixed term exclusions are low in comparison with statistical neighbours. The LEA is making good progress towards meeting its target for reducing permanent exclusions by 2002.

150. The behaviour support plan (BSP) 2000/03 links appropriately with the Education Development Plan, Early Years Development and Childcare Plan and the childrens services plan. Targets are precise and clearly based on identified needs. The LEA has reviewed behaviour support services and is in the early stages of implementing a major reorganisation. Behaviour support teams are currently operating in three of the four county areas. In this period of transition, there is some disruption of services and disparity of provision across the county. In the short-term, this is causing difficulties for some schools but schools remain optimistic about the future arrangements.

151. Most aspects of the behaviour support plan (BSP) have been implemented successfully. Some schools have accessed effective behaviour management training for teachers, learning support assistants and midday supervisors. Helpful guidelines for schools on recognising and eliminating bullying have been issued. Projects on anger management and work to prevent the exclusion of minority ethnic pupils have been implemented. Multi-agency training provided by education, social services, health, police and the youth service has focused appropriately on keeping pupils in school.

152. The LEA provides appropriate support to secondary schools in the use of the pupil retention grant. Schools have used funding to train teachers in behaviour management and to set up in-school centres with the support of the LEA's behaviour support team.

Health, safety, welfare, child protection

153. Arrangements for discharging responsibilities for health and safety are good. They are co-ordinated by an officer within the education and community learning (ECL) directorate whose time is purchased by the corporate centre for one day a

week. Regularly updated health and safety guidance, documents and specialist training are provided for schools. Detailed monitoring is in place and the content of training is informed by the findings of these regular audits. Appropriate systems exist for safety problems to be promptly reported by schools. The service was rated by the schools surveyed as being in the top quartile of LEAs inspected.

154. The LEA meets its statutory duties in relation to child protection. Clear standards and procedures are in place to support child protection processes, which have been revised in line with the recent government guidance, 'working together'. The education welfare service gives clear advice to schools on dealing with children whose welfare is giving cause for concern. Each school has a designated senior member of staff with responsibility for child protection. Multi-agency training has been provided and its take-up is monitored effectively by the LEA. Training has been well received by schools visited during the inspection. The area child protection committee promotes 'protective behaviours' as an effective method of helping children keep safe. A number of staff from the ECL directorate are accredited 'protective behaviours' trainers and provide advice and training for schools.

155. Liaison between the ECL directorate, the social care and health directorate and the health authority is good at a strategic level although at a school level, liaison with social workers is not always effective. Schools report difficulties with staff turnover and shortages. In other instances, difficulties have arisen from the lack of shared understanding of the revised thresholds for social services intervention. Whilst these revisions have been clearly presented in the recent guidance, confusion still exists in some schools.

Children in public care

156. Support for children in public care is satisfactory and improving rapidly. There are 603 children of school age in the care of the local authority, a figure which is above average for comparable councils. Although the council has placed a high priority on improving the educational opportunities of children in care, its role as corporate parent is in need of further development. A corporate parenting board has been established recently to monitor and oversee work in this area.

157. In October 2000, a comprehensive Best Value review of children in public care made significant recommendations on the way in which the ECL and the social care and health directorates should organise, in order to raise the attainment of children in public care. A joint policy and practice document has recently been produced which clearly sets out the expectations on both directorates in meeting their shared obligations to children in public care. This document also includes clear examples of a pupil support programme and a personal education plan, together with role specifications for key staff, such as the designated teacher.

158. The two directorates have expanded provision to establish a jointly funded 'Life Chances' team. The team has a strong focus on raising standards of attainment for children in public care, on developing the co-education role of social workers, teachers and carers, and in ensuring that all reviews include a focus on the educational progress of the child. Future plans include the appointment of study

support assistants and additional homework facilities for pupils in residential placements.

159. There is effective sharing of pupil data between the two directorates in order to track the progress of pupils. Full educational data will be included by the end of September 2001. Detailed targets have been set for English, mathematics and science in each key stage. The percentage of pupils gaining at least one graded result at GCSE level improved from 39 per cent in 1998-99 to 47 per cent in 1999-2000. However, this figure is still too low and below the LEA's own target of 50 per cent; and is significantly below the 70 per cent target for 2002.

160. All schools have identified designated teachers and training has taken place. Further training is planned following the recent launch of the joint policy and practice guidelines. Evidence from school visits indicate that despite the effective collaboration at a strategic level, some schools are still experiencing poor co-ordination and sharing of information regarding individual children in care.

161. The LEA has played a leading role in the East Midlands Regional SEN Partnership to develop regional protocols to ensure careful planning and co-ordination of placement moves for children in public care. As a result of this work, a procedure is currently being piloted for 'out of authority' placements.

Minority ethnic children including Travellers

162. The LEA is providing good support for pupils of minority ethnic heritage, including Travellers. At a corporate level, equal opportunities for all has a high profile and there is good cross service and multi-agency working. Officers from Northamptonshire LEA worked closely with Commission for Racial Equality in developing the school standards 'learning for all'.

163. The multicultural education service (MES) and the Travellers education service (TES) are well established and clear about their new role within the IPS division. The services are well managed with experienced staff who are deployed effectively and are contributing to improvements in schools. Managers of these services are clearly focused on improving attendance and raising attainment. The growing number of minority ethnic pupils has put a strain on the capacity of the MES to provide support for language acquisition. More bilingual support assistants are being recruited to work with children and their parents. The TES is diligent in ensuring children from Traveller families are promptly enrolled in school, and provides appropriate support.

164. Funding is devolved according to a set of well-developed criteria. The MES has produced useful guidance on assessing the needs of minority ethnic pupils that takes account of language acquisition, events in the life of the child and cultural factors. MES staff visit schools to monitor targets and help assess training needs. The LEA is collecting and monitoring attainment and attendance data by ethnic group. This is enabling more focused support for schools and realistic targets to be set.

Gifted and talented children

165. Support for gifted and talented pupils is a developing aspect of the LEA's work and is satisfactory overall. A policy statement and guidance on the identification of gifted and talented pupils produced some time ago remain relevant. Some exemplar policies on gifted and talented pupils from schools are available through NIAS. In-service training for supporting such pupils in science, design and technology, religious education and the use of ICT is contained in the current professional development programme. Four LEA summer schools were run in 2000 and an additional school in the EAZ.

Social exclusion

166. The LEA has a strong commitment to social inclusion and is innovative in its approaches. Following the outcomes of a detailed audit and in consultation with schools, all support for social inclusion and special educational needs has been brought together into an inclusion and pupil support (IPS) division, managed by a second tier officer who is a member of the ECL directorate management team. The IPS division incorporates a range of services: special educational needs, social inclusion, educational psychology, education welfare, equality and four area IPS co-ordinators. The IPS has been formed recently and is in the process of establishing operational services organised into four multidisciplinary area teams to meet local needs. Each area of the county now has a team drawn from across IPS services. Progress with restructuring is generally good and going ahead according to plan. At the time of the inspection, this restructuring was not completed and the new arrangements for some services in some parts of the county were not fully in place.

167. The LEA has given good leadership to schools in tackling all forms of racism. Opportunities to collaborate with ethnic minority communities have been grasped and valuable partnerships forged between education, health and police services. The LEA supports five locally-based multi-agency groups against racist attacks and harassment (MAGRAHs). The Police and the Black Police Association have made a good contribution to raising the aspirations of minority ethnic pupils through its involvement in schools. The council encourages the reporting of racist incidents and receives reports and monitors them.

168. In response to the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, the LEA has implemented an impressive action plan. All schools have been advised of the impact of the Human Rights Act and revisions to the Race Relations Act and encouraged to review their policies, procedures and practices. Appropriate guidance has been issued to schools on recording, reporting and responding to racist incidents. Ethnic monitoring is in place and schools are returning data on attainment and attendance. The LEA has established a clear policy to recruit, train and retain teachers, learning support assistants, administrative staff, governors and advisers from minority ethnic groups.

APPENDIX: SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

In order to further support schools in becoming discerning purchasers:

- provide improved guidance to schools on approaches to Best Value principles.

SECTION 2. SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

In order to improve further the LEA's strategy for differentiated support to schools:

- clarify the process by which the level of LEA contact in a school is determined and specify the expected levels of contact and support for each of the three categories.

In order to improve the targeting of LEA resources for school improvement:

- review and re-direct the use of link inspector time to fully reflect the differentiated model of contact with schools and their capacity for self improvement.

In order to promote school autonomy:

- ensure that reviews are undertaken only in those schools identified by the LEA and OFSTED as giving cause for concern; and
- delegate the resources currently held centrally for subject reviews.

In order to enhance schools' involvement in the imminent Best Value review of school improvement:

- provide clear and detailed information on the scale and use of funding within Northamptonshire inspection and advisory service (NIAS).

In order to assist schools in the target-setting process:

- ensure that headteachers are aware of the method of adding challenge within the LEA target range for each school.

In order to judge the effectiveness of the additional budget granted for schools causing concern:

- set clear medium term targets by which progress can be measured; and
- use the wide evidence available from across the education and community learning (ECL) directorate to ensure sharp, rigorous and timely support and intervention are taken to prevent any further deterioration in schools causing concern.

In order to provide more effective and timely support for school governance where it is weak:

- put in place the mechanisms to co-ordinate support to governing bodies from all services across the LEA.

In order to improve the dissemination of good practice:

- develop with schools a co-ordinated plan to ensure that good practice is disseminated effectively across all schools.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

In order to improve the effectiveness of joint directorate working:

- investigate further how liaison between schools, the education and community learning (ECL) directorate and the social care and health directorate can be improved and thereby ensure a clearer understanding of the respective roles and responsibilities.

In order to assist schools in their purchasing decisions:

- ensure that information on LEA services includes details of non-traded services and information about alternative providers.

In order to improve the quality and accuracy of the payroll service:

- establish mechanisms whereby the payroll service to schools provides the timely and error free service required.

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

In order to further improve the efficiency of the statutory assessment process:

- identify ways in which to reduce the timescale taken for statutory assessment.

In order to further improve the transparency of the moderation process:

- establish ways in which headteachers and special educational need co-ordinators (SENCOs) can be involved in the decision-making process for statutory assessment.

In order to improve the quality of monitoring and support for designated special provision in mainstream schools:

- ensure that link inspectors have the expertise necessary to advise and monitor the quality of provision on a regular basis.

SECTION 5 : ACCESS

In order to ensure that every child has a fair chance of a satisfactory school place:

- work with headteachers in areas of the county facing problems to ensure that admission arrangements are co-ordinated effectively.

In order to improve the maintenance of school buildings:

- strengthen the process for monitoring schools' maintenance of their buildings and their spend against priorities in the asset management plan.

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