



**OFFICE FOR STANDARDS
IN EDUCATION**

**INSPECTION OF
KENT
LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

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INTRODUCTION

1. This report details the findings of a short inspection conducted under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The purpose of the inspection was to evaluate the progress made in responding to the findings and recommendations of the first inspection which took place in November 1998. The inspection also evaluated progress on devising and implementing aspects of the Education Development Plan (EDP). The report also comments on other developments since the original inspection. This 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 conducted by a small team of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) in conjunction with the Audit Commission. The inspection involved scrutinising documentation, interviewing elected members, the chief executive and senior officers. Discussions were held with diocesan representatives, and with groups of headteachers and teachers. A questionnaire on LEA support was sent to all schools and replies were received from 71 per cent of schools. Account was also taken of evidence about the work of the LEA from other divisions within OFSTED.

COMMENTARY

3. The OFSTED report of November 1998 found Kent LEA to have a mixture of strengths and weaknesses. The authority was discharging the majority of its functions adequately and, under effective political and professional leadership, was showing signs of improvement. Nevertheless, inconsistencies in the quality and level of service delivery, weaknesses in support for school improvement and, most markedly, inadequate performance in the provision of support for children with special educational needs (SEN) gave considerable cause for concern.

4. Satisfactory progress has been made on most of the recommendations made in the report, but important weaknesses remain. The authority has now improved its performance in:

- ensuring school improvement priorities are effectively implemented;
- improving the quality of support to schools;
- improving the quality of support for pupils with special educational needs;
- improving the quality of post-16 provision;
- improving support for the management of school budgets; and
- improving the efficiency and consistency of the selection process at 11+.

Additionally, weaknesses in payroll and in tackling surplus school places have now been rectified.

5. The LEA has also clarified and given additional focus to its role and strategy in support of school improvement. For example, the revised Education Development Plan (EDP) is a marked improvement on its predecessor. The focus on aspects that require improvement is now much sharper. Activities that diverted funding unnecessarily from schools have been deleted. Links between priorities are more securely established. Overall, the LEA is trying to do less, but to do it better.

6. Nevertheless, weaknesses remain. The quality of service delivery is still, despite much effort, too variable, and that variability fuels the hostility toward the LEA felt by some headteachers. The commitment to a school-focused ethos shown by senior managers and leading members has yet to reach all staff, or all services, some of which are universally well regarded, others not so. The poor performance of property services is a major concern. There, and elsewhere, headteachers are critical, often rightly, of inefficiencies such as delays in responding to enquiries. The LEA is exploring private sector solutions to some of its least well performing services; one service has already been outsourced. Also, although the LEA has made progress in improving the quality of school buildings, this is not yet sufficient.

7. More, perhaps, than in any other inspection, we were made forcibly aware of the adverse views of the LEA held by a minority of headteachers. We have taken the unusual step in this report of dealing in detail with their main criticisms, along with some others that are more commonly held. Some are fair, some not; some are based on an experience of the LEA that is now out of date; some spring from a desire for greater autonomy; some from a settled conviction among a few headteachers that there is no role for the LEA.

8. The LEA continues, moreover, to be challenged by the excessively complex pattern of its school organisation; a position made more difficult by the return to the LEA, in September 1999, of 88 former grant maintained (GM) schools. Schools in Kent range, in their relationship to the LEA, from excessive dependency to a fiercely guarded autonomy. The LEA has sought, with some success, to streamline communication and consultation, but that is not the heart of the issue. The LEA's constituency is so complex that its response to it has to be very flexible. At the very least, it has to convince a sizeable number of its schools that it can add value. This is a challenge it has not, to date, been able to meet. The LEA also needs to explore ways of granting more autonomy to those successful schools that wish for it.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

9. There has been no overall change in the socio-economic characteristics of the LEA since autumn 1998. However, the introduction of the new categories of schools in September 1999 has resulted in a major change for the LEA. Over 50 per cent of Kent's secondary schools had been grant maintained. In all, when the new categories were introduced, Kent gained an additional 88 schools, equivalent in size to a small authority. This change has emphasised the cultural differences between Kent schools, which are explored in greater depth in paragraph 39 below.

10. The provision of education in Kent remains very complex. Over 204,000 pupils attend maintained primary, secondary and special schools. There are 475 primary schools, including 57 infant, 7 first and 54 junior schools. The numbers under each category are: 269 community; 14 foundation; 76 voluntary aided; and 116 voluntary controlled.

11. Kent has 106 secondary schools including three middle schools. The numbers under each category are: 41 community; 47 foundation; 13 voluntary aided and five voluntary controlled. There are 33 grammar schools, attended by 32 per cent of secondary pupils. The non-selective schools include wide-ability and high (secondary modern) schools. There is a wide range of secondary school size; 20 per cent of secondary schools have fewer than 600 pupils. There are 30 special schools.

12. As before, the proportion of pupils in primary schools with statements of special educational need (SEN) is broadly average (2.8 per cent compared with 2.6 per cent nationally and 2.5 per cent in statistical neighbours). In secondary schools the proportion of pupils with statements remains similar to the national average, although higher than the average for statistical neighbours (4.2 per cent compared with 3.9 per cent nationally and 3.5 per cent in statistical neighbours).

13. There has been a slight rise in the proportion of pupils from ethnic minorities (3.0 per cent compared with 2.7 per cent in 1998). This is still broadly in line with national figures. The number of asylum seekers has increased since 1998.

Performance of schools

14. There has not been much change in the performance of schools since the previous LEA inspection. The most significant changes have been in the numbers of schools deemed to require special measures (which has decreased) or to have serious weaknesses (which has increased). There remains a very wide variation between the performance of schools across the LEA, including between schools with similar intakes. Details are given in the following paragraphs.

15. Pupils' attainment at Key Stage 1 in English and mathematics remains close to the national average, but is below the average for statistical neighbours. At Key Stage 2, performance in English and mathematics remains close to the national average and that of statistical neighbours.

16. At Key Stage 3, pupils' attainment in English, mathematics and science is above the national average and similar to that of statistical neighbours. For mathematics, this is an improvement compared with the position at the time of the previous inspection; otherwise there has not been a change.

17. At GCSE, the proportion of pupils attaining five or more A*-C grades has improved and is now above the national average, although similar to statistical neighbours. The proportion of pupils attaining five or more A*-G grades and one A*-G grade, and the average points score all remain average. Results at age 18 remain average.

18. The rate of improvement in English and mathematics between 1998 and 1999 was slightly below the national rate at Key Stage 2, but above the national rate at Key Stage 3. Improvement in the GCSE average point score was similar to that found nationally.

19. Since November 1998 there has been an overall reduction, from 16 to eight, in the number of schools requiring special measures. The eight schools include five primary and three secondary. However, the number of schools which have been officially designated as having serious weaknesses has risen from 12 to 33.

20. OFSTED inspection evidence shows that the percentage of Kent's primary and secondary schools graded 'good' or 'very good' is below the average for its statistical neighbours. For secondary schools the proportion is above the national average, whereas for primary schools it is in line with the national average. In addition, evidence from those schools which have been inspected twice suggests that improvements have been made overall in the quality of education and school management. In each case, improvements are similar to those made nationally.

21. Rates of attendance remain average in primary and secondary schools, and as before, rates of unauthorised absence are lower than average. The rate of permanent exclusions has decreased since 1998. It is in line with the rate nationally and that found in statistical neighbours. Staying on rates at post-16 are similar to what they were at the time of the last inspection.

Funding

Standard Spending Assessment

22. Kent LEA's expenditure on education remains close to, although £3.3m below, the Standard Spending Assessment (SSA). The £34.748m increase in the SSA for 2000/01 has been duly passed on to the education budget. Additionally, Kent is spending at 24 per cent above its capital financing block, much of which is on school buildings.

FINANCIAL YEAR	SSA (£m)	BUDGET (£m)	VARIANCE %
1997/98	588.1*	583.5*	- 0.78
1998/99	525.6	524.3	- 0.24
1999/2000	553.5	550.3	- 0.58
2000/01	588.3	585.0	- 0.56

* includes Medway (now a unitary authority)

Delegation

23. The LEA has, in the past, had a low level of delegation to schools. It has now made a commitment to increase delegation to schools, and has already moved some way. For example, in 1997/98, only seventeen authorities in the country retained a higher percentage of resources for central administration. By 1999/2000, Kent had improved considerably but was still a little below average in this respect. In 1999/2000 the authority delegated 80.3 per cent of its Local Schools Budget (LSB), which was closer to, but still below, the English counties average of 81.3 per cent although further from the median of its statistical neighbours (82.7 per cent).

24. Further progress has been made in the current year. In 2000/01, Kent will delegate 83.2 per cent of the LSB to schools, which is above the DfEE target of 80 per cent. The amount held back centrally per pupil for management and administration will be £43.43; well within the target of £65 per pupil or less.

25. The authority has made genuine efforts to involve headteachers in the debate about which resources should be delegated. A central costs task force now considers all central costs for possible delegation. This has worked well in its first year of operation.

26. Kent retained a relatively high percentage for SEN in 1999/2000 (25 per cent above the average for English counties). The SEN area is currently under review in Kent's *All Together Better* project.

The allocation of resources to meet changing priorities

27. The authority has made little progress in shifting resources to meet changing priorities. For example, in 2000/01, an additional £0.9m has been added to the delegated budget for additional educational needs (AEN)/SEN and junior school budgets have been enhanced by £0.3m.

28. Members have expressed a commitment in principle to provide extra support to high schools to reflect their additional needs. To date, this has been achieved only to a limited degree. Even though of the £0.9m budget increase for AEN/SEN, some £0.8m was allocated to high schools, this was less than 0.2 per cent of the total schools budget. The vast majority of delegated resources are still allocated on a per pupil basis.

29. Revenue-funded property maintenance funding has been increased, reflecting the commitment to improve the building stock.

Council structure

30. The political balance of the County Council remains unchanged since the first inspection at 45 Conservative, 23 Labour and 16 Liberal Democrats. From late 1999 there has been a scrutiny process with scrutiny committees associated with each major committee. A Cabinet structure has been adopted in advance of legislation.

31. Members show a strong commitment to education. The leader and chair of education are active, well informed and give a clear steer on policy. They are particularly concerned to improve standards in schools and secondly, to deliver effective services. The political parties are divided on the question of selection, but united in their general concern for education. Members feel well advised by officers and there are good working relationships. Senior officers in Kent have considerable delegated powers.

32. The director of education and libraries is a member of the Council's corporate board, along with the chief executive and five other strategic directors or officers. A feature of the Council structure is that support services such as personnel, finance, property and information technology are provided corporately and are not under the line management of the director of education and libraries.

Leadership, consultation and communication

33. The previous report expressed confidence in the quality of the LEA's senior management. Senior managers and elected members clearly acknowledged the weaknesses that existed in the LEA's provision, and were determined to tackle them. Planning had recently improved. The LEA consulted well with its schools, who generally welcomed the new sense of direction and purpose in the senior management of the LEA. However, headteachers sometimes felt overwhelmed by the paperwork arriving at school.

34. Senior managers and elected members continue to be aware of weaknesses and are keen to tackle them. Improvements have been made, for example in targeting underachievement by schools and pupils, increasing delegation to schools, producing a strategy for inclusion and in dealing with most of the recommendations made in the previous report. The quality of strategic planning continues to be good. The majority of headteachers acknowledge the progress made in these areas and continue to express confidence in the leadership of the LEA. There is, however, frustration about the lack of progress in other areas - most particularly concerning the fact that the quality of services to schools remains uneven.

35. As described in paragraph 39, the LEA's constituency is such that it is difficult to achieve effective communication and consultation. Nevertheless, the LEA makes considerable efforts. It continues to provide schools with a lot of information, and to consult extensively.

36. A number of steps have been taken to help improve the quality of consultation and communication. These are appropriate and timely. A 'rapid-response group' of headteachers now screens some questionnaires. Some consultation is on a sample basis only, with all schools able to opt in. The headteacher forums, which pre-date the entry to the LEA of the foundation schools, are being reconstituted to be more representative, and to be chaired by headteachers. There are plans to tie consultation in more closely with the forums, to allow wider and more meaningful discussion.

37. Other positive moves include the addition of priority ratings to documents, and a newsletter which summarises important developments. All school policies are

now available on CD ROM. The education and libraries directorate has an attractive and informative website. The director and some headteachers would like to see much greater use of electronic methods of communication, but a minority of schools are not yet ready for this.

38. However, some important weaknesses remain. Schools continue to feel overwhelmed by the amount of paper received and the level of response, even to major consultations, is not high. Schools are not always aware of proposed developments and a substantial minority lack understanding of the implications of the Code of Practice for LEA-School Relations.

Relationships with schools

39. As outlined in paragraphs 9-11, Kent has a more complex pattern of school provision than any other county. The different types of schools have very different cultures and expectations of the LEA. At one end of the scale, many of the foundation schools in particular, but also some of the community secondary schools, are autonomous and entrepreneurial. Indeed, a small group of perhaps eight to ten foundation school headteachers see little or no role for the LEA. At the other extreme, there is a sizeable group of primary schools and some special schools which not only want to belong to the LEA, but are still over-dependent on it. There are schools occupying various intermediate positions. The polarisation of views, resulting from the schools' different expectations, makes it very difficult for the LEA to satisfy all schools. This problem is exacerbated by the size of the LEA.

40. **A summarised list of some of the most strongly articulated school views is given below, with the inspection team's view below, showing whether or not we agree.** (The schools' views are in bold, with the inspectors' views in italics below).

a) The funding allocated to the high schools does not sufficiently reflect their needs; some high schools, in particular, have a disproportionate number of pupils with difficulties and with special educational needs.

The inspection team accepts that some of the high schools have greater needs than other schools and this report includes a recommendation to review the funding formula. The LEA has made some additional funds available to high schools this year and has indicated that more will be available in the future.

b) Selection has adverse affects on other schools and pupils and, in particular, leads to problems in those high schools which are not full and have to accept pupils excluded from other schools.

The inspection team cannot comment on the principle of selection, which is the Council's policy and beyond our remit. However, the situation is more complex than described as it partly results from parents choosing other high and wide-ability schools. The team can comment on whether such schools receive sufficient support from the LEA. Many do receive additional support, for example when they are also a designated cause for concern to the LEA, and one is part of the new Education Action Zone. The LEA also has proposals to encourage a more even sharing out of

excluded pupils. However, there is yet to be sufficient impact of LEA support on low performing high schools, in terms of raising standards for pupils. Providing effective support for these schools forms part of a recommendation in the report.

c) Secondary Admissions. The LEA has not listened to the very strong views expressed by some high and wide-ability schools concerning the order of assessment and the stating of parental preferences in the selection and admissions process.

The inspection team realises that strong views are held by both sides in this debate and that it is very difficult to reach a consensus. The LEA is sensibly about to undertake a major consultation on this point and on the timing of the tests. The consultation will involve parents.

d) The EDP and LEA support in general are too much targeted towards the weak schools; there is not enough for the more successful schools.

The inspection team disagrees with this view. The LEA should and does focus on supporting the weaker schools, and it has recently taken steps to explain to all schools where the EDP can meet their particular needs. The fact that so many schools expressed this view shows that the LEA needs to do more to explain the Code of Practice for LEA-School Relations to all schools. It also needs to target its advisory services even more precisely.

e) The LEA is unnecessarily bureaucratic. For example, the Council insisted on re-auditing the ex-GM schools when they rejoined the LEA. The LEA sends out financial monitoring forms which are not necessary. In general, the LEA sends out too many documents.

The inspection team believes the audit on re-entry was a sensible precaution and uncovered a small number of instances in which locally developed financial systems needed to become more robust. The financial monitoring forms are necessary and broadly similar to those in use in other authorities. The LEA has agreed to move to a more risk-based audit procedure, which should reduce the burden on schools. A lot of paper is sent out by the LEA to its schools, but the LEA has introduced checks and monitoring systems to try to reduce the flow. A recent analysis showed that only 25 per cent of the documents received by schools originated from the LEA. However, the LEA must continue to try to improve the situation, even though it is exacerbated by the documents sent out from other sources.

f) Service quality is still far too variable and response times are often too slow.

The inspection team agrees with this and includes a specific recommendation in the report.

g) The central staffing of the education department is growing, and the new management structure for pupil services is going to cost more than the one it replaces.

The inspection team does not consider that central staffing is growing unreasonably. Over the last two years, central budget has reduced by seven per cent. It is true that from 1998/99 to 1999/2000 the number of advisory staff grew from 72.5 to 84. Most of the extra staff are numeracy or National Grid for Learning consultants, paid for by Standards Fund. In addition, the LEA seconded two secondary deputy headteachers as secondary advisers, posts which are now being made permanent, and appointed one additional English adviser for the secondary phase. This is entirely reasonable given the large number of secondary foundation schools which re-entered the LEA in 1999. The new pupil services structure is projected to cost about £20-£40,000 more than the old one, but this is a relatively small proportion of the overall budget for the service.

h) The new structure of 12 districts, each with a district schools officer (DSO) and a district advisory officer (DAO), does not work well at secondary level.

The inspection team considers that the structure is fairly new and has not had time to settle down fully. A period of consolidation is needed. Although there is some variation, on the whole, primary schools like and are well served by it. The majority of secondary headteachers are reasonably expected to be more independent but, nevertheless, have access to senior officers as well as those based locally. Furthermore, the LEA is appointing two new secondary advisers.

i) The LEA does not understand the difference between community and foundation schools and does not set down anywhere its relative responsibilities to each group.

The inspection team notes that the LEA has clearly defined the differences in respect of property, admissions and similar functions. However, there is also a perception among some foundation schools that different arrangements should apply to them on all issues, because of their history of autonomy. The LEA should explore mechanisms for allowing successful schools that want to have a more independent existence to do so. The report includes a recommendation about this. The new school-led Education Action Zone presents a possible way ahead that is worthy of further exploration.

j) The arrangements for the Pupil Retention Grant are not helpful to schools. For example, schools face losing £5,000 and the sum allocated to the school for the pupil if a pupil is excluded.

The inspection team view is that the LEA is following the requirements of the DfEE in this. The cost to the LEA of supporting an excluded pupil for 25 hours per week is expensive and nationally it is between two and a half to three times more expensive than keeping a pupil in full time education in a school. The LEA's monitoring arrangements are a statutory requirement.

41. To summarise, the LEA is trying reasonably hard to meet schools' needs in the light of changed circumstances and within the framework of national policy. However, some further action is needed.

The Education Development Plan

42. At the time of the original inspection, the LEA had identified and defined its new role and priorities in relation to its statutory duties and responsibility for school improvement. Priorities in the directorate plan and in an early draft of the EDP brought together local needs and national initiatives, and were securely based on the LEA's analysis of performance. Schools considered themselves to have been consulted well on the EDP, considering that LEA objectives were generally congruent with those in their own school development plans, and reflected their agenda on school improvement.

43. In the period following the first inspection, the EDP received approval by the DfEE for the full three-year period. The plan overall is sound, although there are some weaker elements such as the attempt to do too much over too broad a front. The plan is based on a thorough audit and analysis of performance using a wide range of available data. It represents an honest appraisal of strengths and weaknesses and makes appropriately explicit references to poor performance by some pupils and weak provision by some schools.

44. There are six priorities that reflect both local needs and national priorities. Major areas of weakness, such as underachieving schools, are emphasised.

1. Improving the quality of teaching and learning
2. Improving the quality of leadership and management
3. Raising the standards in the key skills of literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT)
4. Identifying, supporting and challenging underachieving schools
5. Establishing and improving target setting process in all schools
6. Developing effective approaches to inclusion

45. The strategy for each priority area is defined well. Success criteria for most activities are sufficiently clearly defined as quantifiable outcomes. However, there are a few missed opportunities to strengthen action by making clear links between inter-related strategies. For instance, there is insufficient linkage between activities on improving the quality of teaching and learning and those on raising standards in the key skills. Until very recently, there was insufficient information in some priorities to show where activities are focused, and a substantial minority of the schools that responded to the school survey failed to see either the relevance of the plan or how they could access support.

46. Satisfactory progress has been made in the last year in implementing all aspects of the EDP, especially in areas relating to supporting schools causing concern and in establishing and improving the target setting process in schools. A thorough monitoring and evaluation framework for the plan is in place. A steering group involving officers, headteachers and governor representatives takes oversight of the planning and implementation of each of the priorities and associated activities. A lead officer for each priority is responsible for driving forward each priority, reporting progress to the steering group and liaising with those charged with delivering activities.

47. An update to the plan, which was distributed to schools for consultation in January 2000, represents a marked improvement. The LEA has taken the opportunity to address issues raised by the DfEE; for example, in improving the links between priorities and omitting from the plan activities where funding would be more appropriately delegated to schools. There is now a sharper focus on specific aspects of school performance that need improvement, for example ICT at all key stages, the achievement of boys, and standards of writing. Officers have taken steps to ensure that schools are better aware of the focus of support and relevance of activities.

48. The LEA has also provided improved information to show how resources have been allocated to priorities. In particular, the management costs of the plan are clearer and at £21 per pupil are in line with such costs in similar authorities. Despite the better-presented information, there is still some lack of clarity as headteachers interviewed remain unclear about levels of resourcing for the EDP. They were not, therefore, in a position to make judgements about the value for money of the plan.

The Post-OFSTED action plan

49. The LEA took the recommendations made in the original report seriously and produced a detailed action plan. This shows many of the elements of good planning. It sets clear responsibilities and timescales, and specifies resources and links to other plans. Success criteria are specific, and are usually measurable where appropriate. Arrangements for monitoring and evaluation are included.

50. In some cases, circumstances have arisen which have required changes to the action plan. For example, the timescale for the plan dealing with the recommendation concerning post-16 provision was sensibly amended so that account could be taken of a Government White Paper. The LEA has also delayed a planned survey of schools' satisfaction with services because of its proximity to the Audit Commission school survey sent out in connection with this inspection.

51. The plan was not designed to be completed within one year. The individual plans for some of the recommendations are necessarily long term. It is also proving very difficult, in the context of selection, to reach a consensus on the tricky issue of secondary admissions. At the time of the inspection, although progress had been made in all areas, more remained to be done in a number of areas.

Recommendations

In order to improve support to some of the high schools in particular:

- the funding formula should be reviewed to reflect the needs of schools.

In order to improve the quality of communication and consultation:

- further steps should be taken, in partnership with schools, to improve the effectiveness of communication and consultation.

In order to satisfy the needs of the most autonomous schools:

- ways should be explored in which successful schools which want a more independent existence can be granted one.

SECTION 2: PROGRESS ON IMPLEMENTING THE RECOMMENDATIONS MADE IN THE FIRST INSPECTION REPORT

RECOMMENDATION A

52. In order to achieve greater consistency in the quality and level of service delivery, the LEA should:

- **ensure that services have a common approach to planning, target setting, monitoring and evaluation.**

53. The previous report identified a wide variation in the quality and level of service delivery. This applied equally to inspection, advice and curriculum support; other services which improve access and achievement; and management services.

54. Although there is evidence that considerable efforts have been made during that last two years to secure improvements, there is still too much unjustifiable variation, both between services and within some services. For example, personnel remains well regarded by schools while property services have been almost universally criticised. Within services such as finance, some headteachers reported receiving sound advice from helpful staff, while others were dissatisfied with the quality, speed and customer focus of the responses they received. While the special support team is particularly well regarded, there is also some perceived variation in the quality of the advisory service.

55. Some features of Kent's management arrangements are positive and help towards achieving consistency. The education department was restructured two years ago to bring in a County structure and consistent policies. The corporate performance management system is sound and works effectively in the education directorate. All service units now have business plans and, although there is some variation in quality, all of those reviewed contained most of the core elements (objectives, targets, action plans and measurable performance indicators). A monitoring system is in place at senior officer and member level. Individual staff agree their own targets derived from these plans, and achievement is monitored through appraisal.

56. However, in contrast, some aspects of the authority's management arrangements and culture militate against consistency and quality in service delivery. There is little evidence that explicit service standards have been set except for some services which are sold to schools. Headteachers expressed particular concerns about response times to letters and telephone calls. Several services are not under the line management of the director of education, making it more difficult for him to bring about improvements.

57. The idea of school autonomy has not been universally embraced across the Council. Although leading members, corporate directors and senior education managers have demonstrated their commitment to this principle, some middle managers and front line staff appear to view schools as recipients of services rather than managers of them. However, a training programme is now underway and a consistent approach to assessing school satisfaction is being developed. The LEA is

also actively considering outsourcing for some of its least well performing services. This is now in place for payroll, and proposed for property services.

58. Genuine efforts have been made to involve headteachers in preparing services for trading, by involving their representatives in the school support services board. However, it is still not clear to some schools that they have the right to opt for external providers because the authority has not always made this explicit. Nor is it clear that in some areas, for example governor training, schools have the option of providing the training themselves.

RECOMMENDATION B

59. **In order to ensure that the LEA's school improvement priorities are implemented effectively, the LEA should:**

- **monitor the implementation by schools of OFSTED action plans on a more consistent basis;**
- **intensify its drive to raise standards in schools which are under-performing, focusing particularly on assisting schools to improve teaching quality;**
- **clarify the operational arrangements for supporting schools so that they do not slide into a serious weakness category.**

60. At the time of the first inspection in November 1998, 16 schools were subject to special measures. From September 1997 to the time of the first inspection, 12 schools were formally designated as having serious weaknesses. The first inspection found that the LEA met its statutory duties in relation to schools in special measures, and that arrangements for monitoring and supporting these schools had been strengthened and deployed effectively to help schools improve their performance. However, at that time, although the LEA used enhanced performance data to identify weak and underachieving schools and schools generally causing concern, it had not clarified the operational arrangements for supporting them.

61. The LEA has made satisfactory progress towards implementing the recommendations.

62. The implementation of OFSTED action plans is monitored appropriately and this part of the recommendation has been accomplished.

63. At the time of the last inspection, the number of schools going into special measures was growing and few had been removed. The school effectiveness division had then recently been formed and the special support team (SST) had only just been set up. The SST has developed considerable strengths and now is effective and regarded highly by schools. A good record of improvement has been achieved in relation to schools requiring special measures. Between the two inspections, although nine more schools have been found to require special measures, 17 schools have been removed and in others recovery is underway.

64. There was a sharp increase in numbers of schools identified as having serious weaknesses in the period autumn 1998 to summer 1999 (from 12 to 33).

The increase is partly because OFSTED only started to identify such schools formally in September 1997. The figures also include three ex-GM schools with serious weaknesses that returned to the responsibility of the LEA. Very recently two schools, despite support from the LEA, were moved by OFSTED from the serious weakness category to the category of requiring special measures. Three schools have been removed from serious weaknesses. A further 76 schools have been identified by the LEA as causing some concern and, of these, about a half have been identified as having weak leadership and management.

65. In the past, the LEA was sometimes too slow to identify and take action in underachieving schools. There was a tendency towards too much reliance on headteachers' own judgements and evidence, with limited checks and balances in place. As a consequence, the LEA allowed a number of schools to continue for too long with weak and poor management without sufficient challenge or intervention.

66. There have been improvements and in general, schools with serious weaknesses or causing concern to the LEA now receive appropriate support. The LEA's operational arrangements are becoming much better co-ordinated and resources are now being much more targeted effectively to meet the schools' needs. Recently the LEA has also further refined the criteria and processes for invoking where necessary, the formal warning procedures set out in the Code of Practice for LEA-School Relations. A cross-directorate school review group considers, on a monthly basis, the progress made by all schools causing concern. Reports on progress of schools with serious weaknesses or subject to special measures are given in confidence to a quality assurance group of members from all parties.

67. Since these structures have been in place, there has been significant stemming of the flow into serious weaknesses and special measures. In particular, no primary school has been found with serious weakness since July 1999. In addition, weak leadership and management have been improved or replaced in more than thirty schools.

68. The LEA has also instigated a series of projects which have been designed to lead to improvement in the weakest secondary schools. Project funding was initially sought for 1999-2000 and, consequently, it is too soon to judge the impact of the initiatives. Work has, however, identified specific priority areas for future attention including boys' underachievement and a dip in quality of teaching and learning in Year 8.

69. Nevertheless, the LEA's support for underachieving schools still needs further improvement. Recent events show the LEA is still occasionally too slow to intervene where management is weak. A further shortcoming is that the quality of written feedback following visits to schools by advisory staff remains variable. In a significant minority of cases, it is too descriptive and lacks clear and rigorous evaluation. It is not clear that all of the lowest performing schools have yet had sufficient support in raising standards.

70. A working group of officers and headteachers, set up in April 1999, has produced a set of early warning indicators for schools causing concern that schools can use in a process of self-evaluation. Self evaluation is to be followed up and

checked by DAOs who will be able to make a bid for additional resources if the evidence suggests support is needed. Although the system has yet to be tried and tested, it is a promising new initiative.

71. The weight of evidence indicates that, providing the LEA identifies and supports the weakest schools and intervenes where necessary, progress is likely to be sustained.

RECOMMENDATION C

72. **In order to improve further the quality of support for schools, the LEA should:**

- **strengthen support to middle managers and staff with other responsibility posts in schools;**
- **work with all schools to establish common practice in transfer of information on pupils between phases of education, particularly between KS2 and KS3;**
- **evaluate the effectiveness of support for the schools Self Review programme so that good practice can be replicated across schools and that School Self review can become an integral part of the LEA's improvement strategy.**

73. The original inspection report identified support for subject leaders as variable. In particular, the provision of regular network meetings of subject leaders was patchy, with school staff feeling isolated from curriculum developments. The transfer of data between primary and secondary was an area of weakness. Schools were not using the standardised format provided by the LEA, which contributed significantly to the late or incomplete data in secondary schools.

74. The original inspection found the principles underpinning support for school self review soundly based and appropriately focused on raising teaching quality and training staff in the skills necessary for self review. However, the LEA had been inconsistent and insufficiently rigorous in its monitoring and review of the programme and too few schools had taken the experience forward as a whole school improvement strategy.

75. Progress on these recommendations has been at least satisfactory. Given the clear LEA strategy and leadership in these areas, combined with a strong commitment to build on current success, progress is likely to be sustained.

76. A major focus for support for middle managers has been through the successful expansion in the provision of locally provided professional development for subject leaders and other managers. This Improving Together Network has attracted support from nearly all of the primary schools and over half of the secondary schools. Responses to the school survey and interviews with headteachers, subject leaders and other managers about the initiative indicate that, whilst provision in some subjects is better than in others, the forum for exchange of ideas and information is generally valued and welcomed. The newly established leadership development centre is helping to add to the range of opportunities

available to subject leaders. Supported School Self-review (SSSR), discussed below, continues to enhance the development of subject leaders.

77. Following on from a successful small scale pilot in summer 1999, arrangements are well in hand for the electronic transfer of Key Stage 2 information to all secondary schools in August 2000. The individual pupil database has been set up in readiness for receiving teacher assessment information and test results. Primary schools have agreed in principle to send the data requested. The overall success of the project depends on the willingness and full co-operation of all schools in submitting the data within the tight timescales set for the exercise.

78. The principles underpinning SSSR continue to be soundly based and appropriately focused on improving the quality of education. The revised primary SSSR training and the newer secondary programme are well received and considered valuable. The middle managers and headteachers interviewed during the inspection reported training and initial involvement in SSSR to be motivating and stimulating. However, the obvious short-term gains in the capacity to engage in self-review are still not always being sustained in the longer term. The part played by the DAOs is pivotal in ensuring that schools take the experience forward as a whole school improvement strategy. At the moment there is too much variability in the way individual advisers are executing this role.

79. The LEA is still in the early stages of developing a full model for school self evaluation and review. There is a coherent overall strategy, including plans to integrate SSSR alongside other school self-review initiatives, such as the early warning indicators discussed in paragraph 73. However, at the moment, advisory staff are not consistently effective in their approach to develop a school's capacity for self-review and to build autonomy. In a few cases there is clear over-dependence on LEA staff to provide guidance and direction. As SSSR becomes more strongly embedded, the LEA should further develop its present practice of giving schools differential amounts of advisory monitoring and support according to need.

RECOMMENDATION D

80. **In order to improve the quality of support to pupils with special educational needs (SEN), the LEA should:**

- **Prioritise objectives and set a timescale for the implementation of the various SEN developments and projects;**
- **Monitor how schools target resources to support SEN provision;**
- **Ensure that the use of resources is aligned with the priorities of inclusion and preventative work;**
- **Eradicate delays in the statementing process to achieve statutory requirements.**

81. The previous inspection found significant weaknesses in the LEA's planning for special educational needs. Aims for the development of support for pupils were not translated into detailed action plans. There were unacceptable delays in the statementing process and procedures for the evaluation of provision for pupils with SEN were not sufficiently rigorous.

82. The progress made by the LEA in relation to recommendation D is satisfactory overall. In particular, the LEA has improved its planning for SEN. However, schools are not clear enough about the LEA's plans, especially the longer-term goals of the *All Together Better* project.

83. In response to the **first part of the recommendation**, the LEA has launched a major inclusion project; *All Together Better*, which has direct links with priority 6 in the EDP. The project has a clear set of principles, concerned with inclusive practices in schools, which relate to a wide range of pupils with additional needs. It reflects very well the Government's agenda on social inclusion, and takes good account of pupils with special educational needs. The project has high status and is managed full time by a senior officer directly responsible to the director. It involves almost 30 officers from across the whole directorate in a wide range of tasks. The steering group is chaired by the director and includes representatives from social services and health trusts. The overall management of the project including the monitoring of progress is good.

84. The project has a set of very relevant strategic aims for the first two years, and a number of key plans have already been implemented or are at a pilot stage. Many plans are concerned with major areas of provision, for example, for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Most are of good quality and although they are not yet fully embedded in practice the intended outcomes should lead to an improvement in schools' and the LEA's provision.

85. In particular, plans to change the funding strategy for pupils with special educational needs and to increase levels of devolved funds aim to give schools greater flexibility in meeting the needs of pupils. This change in funding strategy, together with the implementation of a revised criteria for statutory assessment, aims to reduce the number of pupils identified as having SEN, both with and without statements, and to facilitate earlier intervention by schools.

86. Local Learning Groups are to be created to bring schools and other agencies together, and to enable them to plan locally for the support of pupils with additional educational needs. Three such groups are currently in the pilot stage. This is potentially a very valuable development and there are many good aspects. For example, each pilot group has five key tasks. These are to develop an inclusion plan for each special school in the district and promote similar plans for all other schools; to reduce the number of referrals for assessment and the number of exclusions; to establish a district based multi-agency forum with a co-ordinator; to collect specific data for the district; and to contribute to the implementation of LEA policy. This represents a significant shift of resources and decision-making to schools.

87. *All Together Better* has far reaching implications for the support of pupils with additional educational needs in Kent, and the short and medium term plans are good. The implications for the longer term have not been made clear. Details concerning the pace and phasing of change, especially in relation to the number and type of special schools, and additional provision being planned for in mainstream schools, are lacking.

88. In relation to the **second part of the recommendation**, the LEA has developed a strategy to monitor schools' use of the SEN budget and this has led to the publication of some useful bench-marking information which secondary special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) have found especially helpful. The approach is good. Plans to include an evaluation of the outcomes achieved by pupils in relation to resources in the second stage of the monitoring project are good.

89. Work on the **third part of the recommendation** has been included as an integral part of the *All Together Better* project. Several aspects of the project are planned to provide for improved preventative work. These will include changes to the funding strategy, the refocused role of educational psychologists, and improvements for the pre-school services. At present, Kent spends more on special educational needs than LEAs nationally and more than most county LEAs, and it holds a higher proportion at the centre. There are plans for more funding to be devolved, first for the learning support assistants and in time also the funds currently used to provide teacher support for pupils with learning and behaviour difficulties at Stage 3 of the SEN Code of Practice and for statements. Delegation of funds rather than devolution would better reflect the schools' developing autonomy in taking full responsibility for pupils with special educational needs.

90. Finally, improvements in the statementing process have been made in relation to the **fourth part of the recommendation**. Almost 80 per cent of statements were completed in 18 weeks during 1999/00 compared with 57 per cent in 1998/9. These figures exclude those cases which await advice from other agencies, usually social services and health trusts. When those cases are included the number completed in 18 weeks drops to an unacceptable level of just under 40 per cent although this figure has improved from 13 per cent in 1998/9. The LEA has good strategic liaison with social services and health trusts and is making significant efforts to obtain more timely contributions from them. Further improvement is still required.

91. Despite consultations with schools and the involvement of headteachers and teachers on working groups, stakeholders interviewed as part of the inspection either knew very little about the *All Together Better* project, had not fully considered the implications for their school or were unclear about the longer-term future direction of the LEA's strategy. Whilst general concern was expressed by both primary and secondary SENCOs and by special school headteachers, positive comments were also made about several aspects. In particular, schools appreciate the greater flexibility now available for meeting the needs of pupils with devolved, and ideally delegated funds, and the potential of the Local Learning Groups in achieving better support for pupils.

92. The LEA has a range of systems to communicate with schools and other stakeholders including parents, but often responses to consultations are limited. For example, fewer than 150 responses were received in response to the action planning element of the *All Together Better* project.

RECOMMENDATION E

93. **In order to improve the quality of school accommodation, the LEA should:**

- **set explicit targets for improving school buildings and monitor the progress made.**

94. The previous report found that a large backlog of poor school accommodation had not been addressed. This was the legacy of a long term lack of investment in the building stock.

95. The authority has carried out the action required by this recommendation. Based on an assumption that there was £50m worth of work to be done, it set a strategic objective to reduce the building maintenance backlog by 50 per cent. This would be achieved by allocating £10m in 1999/2000 and £25m over five years. A monitoring system was put in place and some 300 projects duly began in 1999/2000.

96. However, circumstances have changed since 1998. As part of its work on the Asset Management Plan, Kent undertook condition surveys of all its schools by the deadline of 31 March 2000. This revealed at least another £10m worth of necessary maintenance work. Members and officers realise they must now consider the implications of this and agree on revised priorities. This has not been achieved in time for the current year's programme. Overall, although progress has been made, it is not yet sufficient.

RECOMMENDATION F

97. **In order to improve the quality of post-16 provision, the LEA should:**

- **devise a strategic plan based on a clear rationale;**
- **aim to reduce the number of sixth forms which are uneconomic, or unable to offer an appropriate range of provision.**

98. The previous inspection identified a high proportion of small sixth forms. Some sixth forms were being subsidised by the rest of the school and some provided too limited a range of courses. The LEA did not have a clear rationale or strategic plan for post-16 education, although this was identified as a need in the draft EDP.

99. The LEA has made satisfactory progress in implementing this recommendation. It has put in place the steps required to devise a strategic post-16 plan. The timetable for the action plan was, sensibly, amended to take into account the Government's White Paper "Learning to Succeed". A major conference was held in September 1999, and the principles of post-16 provision agreed. This resulted in a paper which is currently the subject of an extensive consultation, involving parents, governors, pupils and employers as well as schools. Following the consultation, proposals for the future post-16 strategy are to be put to the education and libraries committee.

100. Following the previous inspection, LEA officers held interviews with the headteachers of all sixth forms with fewer than 50 pupils. The number of these very small sixth forms has been reduced, from 19 to ten, and the number of schools with sixth forms with fewer than 100 pupils has gone from 40 to 27. The reductions have been achieved by closing some small sixth forms, and by three new initiatives to federate sixth forms. The number of small sixth forms is likely to fall further in the next academic year, in part because six schools have sixth forms which are likely to grow. It is also reasonable to assume that once the LEA has its post-16 strategy in place, it will be in a better position to bring about more reductions.

101. The LEA has not yet convinced all stakeholders of the need for a new strategy. Several headteachers interviewed felt some pupils were best served by the existing small sixth forms although others recognised the need for sixth forms to be cost effective and to offer a breadth of provision.

RECOMMENDATION G

102. **In order to improve the management of school budgets, the LEA should:**

- **work proactively with schools to reduce the number of deficits and excessive roll-overs.**

103. The previous report found that 88 schools (17 per cent of the total at the time) had deficit budgets, while others carried substantial reserves. About one third of the schools in deficit had not agreed a recovery plan with the authority.

104. The situation has improved considerably since then. The LEA has now fully implemented the recommendation on deficit budgets and developed a system for monitoring and advising schools that amass excessive balances.

105. An early warning system has been introduced to identify schools where there may be problems. Discussions then take place with headteachers and governors and action plans are agreed. This approach has proved effective in practice. By Spring 2000, the number of schools with deficits had been reduced by more than half. Of the remainder, the majority have agreed recovery plans, one has had its delegated powers withdrawn, one is closing, and 13 have only recently been identified as having deficits.

106. In contrast, the overall level of balances has increased steadily from 3.2 per cent in 1997/98 to a predicted 4.8 per cent in 1999/2000. A new system has been developed to identify potential balances exceeding two per cent at any school, discuss the implications, and agree an action plan where necessary. In May 2000, more than half of Kent schools had more than two per cent reserves. Officers are pursuing the issues with the schools concerned.

RECOMMENDATION H

107. **Within the context of selection at 11+, the Authority should:**

- **ensure that the process for selection is consistently applied in all LEA maintained schools and that it is transparent and fair to all pupils;**
- **aim to give parents and schools early information on the allocation of pupils to secondary schools;**
- **further develop the process of cross moderation of area selection panels.**

108. The previous report found that selection procedures at 11+ were complex and diverse. The majority of the then GM schools had their own procedures. In some cases, this involved selection by testing. Selection for the then county grammar schools was by testing supplemented by local panels which considered 'borderzone' (borderline) pupils. There was limited moderation between these panels and the LEA could not be sure there was equity in the process.

109. The LEA has made good progress in implementing the first and third parts of the recommendation. Although active discussions were taking place on the second part, a limited amount had been achieved by Spring 2000. There are genuine difficulties in sustaining progress but the authority has a programme for implementation by September 2002.

110. Achieving improvements on all these aspects has been made more difficult by the local context. Views on the role and operation of selection are polarised and it has proved almost impossible for the authority and its stakeholders to achieve consensus on some aspects. Additionally, there are 152 different admissions authorities, and even when consultation is straightforward, changes in admissions procedures take two years from proposal to implementation.

111. Nevertheless, clear progress has been made on several aspects, which should secure greater transparency and equity. First, the 'borderzone' will be discontinued from January 2001 and replaced by testing to select 24 per cent of the Kent cohort, topped up by one per cent successful appeals.

112. Second, a system of moderation has been introduced, for this year only, between local panels. This started with training for panel chairmen which was cascaded to panel members and followed up with a live moderation exercise using current pupil data. Evaluation demonstrated a good level of accuracy. This will not be necessary once the system changes in January 2001.

113. Third, the LEA's English comprehension test is being replaced by verbal and non-verbal reasoning, in an attempt to reduce the risk of cultural bias. Discussions are also underway with the eight grammar schools which retain their own local tests, to try and align these with LEA tests by September 2002.

114. The recommendation to provide parents with early information on allocation of pupils to secondary schools is proving difficult to achieve in the context of selection. The timing of testing is, however, under discussion.

115. At the same time, the authority is about to begin consultation about whether assessment should follow parental preference, or vice versa. It has obtained a legal opinion questioning the validity of the 1999 *Torbay adjudication*, which upheld the principle of preference first. However, the authority is committed in principle to a single, consistent approach across the county to replace existing local variations. Implementation is unlikely before September 2002. It is important that momentum is maintained.

FUNCTIONS WHICH WERE UNSATISFACTORY AT THE TIME OF THE FIRST INSPECTION

Provision of school places

116. The previous report found an unacceptably high level of surplus places in secondary schools (11.2 per cent). In 1997, 21 schools had more than 25 per cent surplus places.

117. School planning and action to remove surplus places is now carried out satisfactorily. Since the previous report, the LEA has acted in a number of local areas to reduce surplus places. Demographic changes also mean that roll increases have reached the secondary sector. The level of surplus places has now been reduced to 8.8 per cent. A further target of seven per cent has been set for the next academic year.

Property services

118. The previous report highlighted the gap between the need for building works and the resources available. This issue is addressed in recommendation E above. The previous report also commented on aspects of service management, acknowledging recent improvements such as the introduction of a helpdesk.

119. However, it appears that progress has not been sustained. In Spring 2000, there remain significant weaknesses in the service. Evidence from the Audit Commission school survey and discussions with headteachers suggest that many schools are currently dissatisfied with property services, which they perceive as having deteriorated. In particular, schools cited high relative costs, slow response times, lack of explicit service standards, and little attempt to take into account the views of the customer.

120. Despite this disappointing performance, there are some positive indications. Recent changes in management are leading to a reassessment of the service's approach to customers. For example, flexible buy-back packages are being developed. A number of headteachers commented favourably on these. Similarly, a new customer feedback procedure will be piloted in Summer 2000.

121. The design and maintenance service is currently being subjected to a best value review. The LEA proposes to outsource this service in the new financial year to achieve better value for money. The new specification will include explicit service standards.

122. The Asset Management Plan (AMP) is now in place and sets clear priorities for the authority. Condition surveys undertaken for the AMP have provided sound baseline data. A disputes procedure has been put in place and has been used by 10 per cent of schools so far. Schools are being consulted about a move towards condition-based funding in 2000/01.

123. All these factors indicate the authority's commitment to improvement. However, there is limited evidence of any real impact on schools at this stage.

Payroll

124. Major problems with payroll were found in the previous report. Error rates were unacceptably high, partly as a result of restructuring and staff vacancies within the service.

125. The function is now performed satisfactorily. Action has been taken on a number of aspects and the authority has already secured considerable improvement. The payroll section is now fully staffed and a level of supervisory management has been introduced. There is evidence that the quality of service has improved. For example, an analysis of the teachers' payroll shows a sharp reduction in the error rate from 0.26 per cent in March 1999 to 0.02 per cent in March 2000.

126. As a result of *Fair Funding*, Kent now offers schools a new ICT package as an alternative to the standard payroll system. Schools using this package commented favourably on it.

127. Other, more far reaching changes are planned to secure better value for money. Following a best practice review, outsourcing to a private contractor has now taken place.

128. The Audit Commission school survey in January 2000 indicated that most schools still considered the payroll function to be poor. However, evidence from focus groups and interviews in May 2000 indicated that a significant number of headteachers feel that the service has now improved.

Support for behaviour

129. At the time of the previous inspection the behaviour support service (BSS) was found to have clear plans and appropriate objectives. Two-thirds of schools considered that support for behaviour management was satisfactory or better. The LEA was also found to make satisfactory provision overall for pupils who were excluded from school. In the Audit Commission school survey for this inspection, support for behaviour was rated satisfactory by primary schools but poor by secondary schools. Alternative provision for excluded pupils was rated poor by primary and secondary schools. As these responses indicated a deterioration in

provision, support for behaviour and provision for excluded pupils were included in this inspection.

130. There is currently a variation in quality of provision. The Behaviour Support Plan is an appropriate and clear strategic plan. Permanent exclusions have fallen since 1998. The LEA now sends exclusions officers into schools at an earlier stage of the process, and has more alternatives available for pupils at Key Stage 4, which have contributed towards improvement. The BSS places emphasis on advice and support and avoiding exclusion. Schools have, for example, been given good advice on the establishment of in-school inclusion units. All schools have access to the BSS via the referral process, which comes into play at Stage 3 of the SEN Code of Conduct. However, schools have mixed views on behaviour support. Although some headteachers interviewed regarded support as highly effective, others were critical of the amount of support available. There were also a few criticisms concerning uneven quality of support.

131. Excluded pupils are supported in 11 Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and through home tuition. The provision is sometimes unsatisfactory at Key Stage 3, where pupils are most difficult to reintegrate and the PRUs tend to be full. A further weakness is that most pupils who are allocated home tuition only receive three hours a week. However the LEA has halved the number of pupils receiving home tuition in the last 12 months - from 150 to 70 pupils, and has a target of a further 50 percent reduction this year. There are plans for all excluded pupils to receive full time education within 15 days by 2002. There are also plans to spread out more evenly those excluded pupils who are reintegrated into secondary schools. A new database has been installed and will be up and running by the end of the summer term, enabling improved monitoring by the LEA.

132. A wide ranging review of behaviour support, as part of *All Together Better* is due to start at the end of the summer term. This is appropriate. The review needs to take into account schools' perceptions of the effectiveness of support.

Recommendations

In order to improve the quality of service delivery:

- appropriate service standards should be set, including response times, for all services;
- schools should be given information about alternative service suppliers to enable them to be informed purchasers.

In order to improve support for school improvement:

- the quality of written feedback following visits by advisory staff should be clear and evaluative, and provide an honest appraisal of performance and provision;
- progress made by schools causing concern should be evaluated carefully, and timely and robust interventions made where needed;
- in all schools where underachievement is identified, prompt attention should be given to, and priority focused on, raising standards;

- the progress towards effective school self-evaluation should be accelerated, and advisory staff should make a real contribution to developing school autonomy.

In order to improve support to pupils with special educational needs:

- the effectiveness of communications with schools should be improved regarding the strategy for inclusion, and support for this provided by including a clearer indication of the longer-term planned outcomes for the *All Together Better* project;
- pressure should be applied at the highest levels of the social services department and health trusts for an improvement in the timeliness of their advice as part of the statutory assessment process, so that children's needs can be provided for faster.

SECTION 3: IMPLEMENTATION OF ASPECTS OF THE EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT PLAN (EDP).

The EDP contributes significantly to meeting the recommendations of the previous report. Therefore, most aspects have been covered in Section 2.

Support for target setting

133. The targets published in the EDP in the main are challenging and realistic. Statutory targets for 2002 agreed by the DfEE include:

- 85 per cent of pupils achieving level 4 or above at Key Stage 2 in English and 75 per cent in mathematics;
- 53 per cent of pupils gaining five or more grade A*-C at GCSE;
- a 37 per cent reduction in the number of pupils excluded from school.

134. Results from 1999 tests and examinations and other information provided by the LEA indicate broadly satisfactory progress towards meeting the targets. In the 1999 National Curriculum tests at Key Stage 2, 69.7 per cent of pupils in English and 68.2 per cent of pupils in mathematics achieved level 4 and above. Compared with 1998, this represents an increase of five per cent in English and eight per cent in mathematics. At GCSE, 52.5 per cent of pupils achieved five A*-C grades in 1999. This was an increase of nearly two per cent when compared to 1998 figures. The LEA is on track to reach its exclusion target.

135. The implementation of the numeracy and literacy strategies has been managed successfully, and training and support have been generally received well by schools. Recent monitoring of literacy has helped identify clear focus for future work and is enabling an approach for schools that is more closely matched to their needs.

136. The authority continues to provide a comprehensive set of comparative performance data for schools and training for its use in setting challenging targets. Indicators for benchmarking, comparative performance and trend data have been helpfully expanded since the last inspection. Good quality materials are now available to assist special schools in setting targets.

Support for Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

137. The LEA strategy for the development of ICT is clear and the support provided to schools is satisfactory. On the basis of the quality of its proposals, the LEA was invited to become a National Grid for Learning (NGfL) "Pathfinder Authority". A heavy emphasis of the NGfL programme to date has been on enhancing the range and quality of computer equipment and in this the LEA has been successful. The authority's approach has also been to work closely with schools to review software and web content as well as producing in-house materials. The resultant materials, available on the Kent NGfL website, are generally good quality and are considered to be a valuable resource by the schools interviewed during the inspection.

138. OFSTED data and the LEA's own audit show an increase in the proportion of primary school information technology lessons graded satisfactory or better. However, the LEA rightly recognises that ICT training has not yet had a consistent enough impact on the quality of pupils' learning across the key stages. As a consequence the revisions to the EDP from April 2000 show a greater clarity and more appropriate focus on raising standards in the ICT curriculum.

139. In general, primary schools consider that the LEA provides appropriate support for the development of the ICT curriculum, albeit sometimes difficult to access, and has taken a well balanced approach to the NGfL programme. There is less satisfaction in secondary schools. Despite the best attempts of the authority, including use of newsletters and the website, to ensure adequate communication, not all secondary schools are clear about the LEA strategy and the criteria for allocating funds for ICT.

Support for management

140. Support for management and leadership has been rightly identified as a priority within the EDP and remains a specific focus for attention from April 2000 onwards. The second cycle of OFSTED inspections indicates an improvement in the quality of leadership and management and there is evidence from primary schools that the LEA is making a satisfactory contribution to this; for instance, in the work undertaken in supporting school self-evaluation and target setting and through the LEA monitoring programme.

141. Evidence from secondary schools, however, is variable. In response to the school survey, nearly half of secondary schools rated support for headteachers and senior managers as poor. There is some scepticism about the role of the DAOs and their ability to support and challenge secondary schools to raise standards. Secondary headteachers consider that the LEA has not given sufficient emphasis in tailoring advisory staffing levels to meet the needs of secondary schools. The LEA admits to focusing more on the needs of primary schools than secondaries, and is also committed in principle to delegating resources to schools and to developing school autonomy. Nevertheless, it has accepted the thrust of the criticisms and is in the process of enhancing support for management at secondary level by appointing two new secondary advisers.

142. The LEA provides a range of meetings, courses and development opportunities for senior managers, including opportunities to be involved in national training programmes; these are generally well received. Most of the headteachers interviewed appreciated especially the opportunity afforded through the "improving together network" for them to attend focused briefing sessions. Schools also value the LEA's guidance materials on school management.

143. Support for new headteachers is inadequate. Despite training opportunities and courses that are well received, the authority does not operate a robust mentoring scheme to offer support to new headteachers during the early stages of their appointment. The lack of such a system is felt most keenly by those

headteachers who are new to the authority and who have some difficulty in knowing how to access the support networks that are available.

144. The LEA is also focusing attention on developing subject leaders and other managers and curriculum co-ordinators' management skills in planning and monitoring and developing self evaluation and review. These, and other aspect of support for management have already been evaluated in paragraphs 78-82.

Recommendation

In order to improve the support for school management:

- the level of support available for newly appointed headteachers should be improved.

SECTION 4: OTHER DEVELOPMENTS SINCE THE FIRST INSPECTION

Best Value

145. The Authority has prepared well for Best Value. Useful experience was gained through *Best Practice*, Kent's own dry run for Best Value in the period up to April 2000. The Council's existing performance management arrangements are well-integrated with Best Value and there is a clear link with statutory education plans.

146. The five year review programme includes the following topics with an education element in each of Years 1–5:

Year 1	Property Services Information systems and strategy Personnel development and strategy
Year 2	Schools' organisation and transport
Year 3	School improvement and effectiveness Youth Services - disaffected youth
Year 4	School Support Services Libraries and information services
Year 5	Adult education and Lifelong Learning

The review of Property Services is still underway.

Statutory plans

147. Kent has met all new requirements to produce statutory plans. The School Organisation Plan, Infant Class Size Plan and Asset Management Plan (AMP) are now all in place and have been approved by the DfEE. The AMP has been commended by the DfEE as an example of good practice.

The Education Action Zone

148. The Kent-Somerset Virtual Education Improvement Zone is a promising development. It is at an early stage at the moment, as activities only really began at the start of the summer term 2000. It arose from collaborative work between three non-selective specialist technology colleges in Kent which recruited other schools and then made links with Somerset. Schools are widely spread and communication technologies provide the backbone for activities. Although the Zone is school driven, the LEA has provided considerable support for example in setting up the proposal and in providing matched funding. One of the most important aspects of the development is that it provides an avenue for the LEA to explore ways in which schools can lead a more independent existence.

149. The aim of the Zone is to develop independent learners. Key developments include curriculum developments around the acquisition of basic skills; work with parents; development of emotional intelligence; new approaches to careers; Key Stage 2/3 transitions and work on developing a life-long approach to health and

fitness. So far the emotional intelligence programme has started, but it is too early to see any impact in the schools.

Provision of school places for asylum seekers

150. The previous inspection identified good structures and strategies for providing for asylum seekers. The Traveller education support service, which took a leading role in this work, had been the catalyst for a good deal of commendable development. Since November 1998, the rate of arrival of asylum seekers has increased considerably. This inspection therefore included a consideration of the support arrangements, with a particular focus on the provision of school places.

151. The LEA continues to make good provision in this area. It has responded strategically to the increased numbers of asylum seekers. There is a good level of multi-agency working for example with the Social Services Department. Within Education, a joint service project team has been established, funds available under the Ethnic Minority and Travellers Achievement Grant have been redirected, and some extra money has been made available. The Commission for Racial Equality visited Kent in October 1999 and made suggestions which the LEA has turned into a plan for action.

152. There are sufficient school places available for the pupils concerned. However, understandably, the LEA has struggled to keep pace with the very high level of turnover. The most usual reason for a child not having a school place is that the family is no longer at the address originally given. The most recent figures show that although 779 children are known not to have entered education, 402 children are in school. In addition, many more who have now left the area, have been found school places this year. Great efforts are made to contact families on arrival, and the project team is providing supportive induction arrangements for pupils arriving in school. Schools value the expertise and support of the team. Children are not removed from the database until the service is assured they have left the LEA.

153. As well as receiving asylum seekers from outside the United Kingdom, Kent also receives families and unaccompanied minors who are placed in the area by other boroughs. Despite a request by the chief executive last year to London Boroughs asking for information when families are placed in Kent, this is not happening.

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve support to some of the high schools in particular:

- the funding formula should be reviewed to reflect the needs of schools.

In order to improve the quality of communication and consultation:

- further steps should be taken, in partnership with schools, to improve the effectiveness of communication and consultation.

In order to satisfy the needs of the most autonomous schools:

- ways should be explored in which successful schools which want a more independent existence can be granted one.

In order to improve the quality of service delivery:

- appropriate service standards should be set, including response times, for all services;
- schools should be given information about alternative service suppliers to enable them to be informed purchasers.

In order to improve support for school improvement:

- the quality of written feedback following visits by advisory staff should be clear and evaluative, and provides an honest appraisal of performance and provision;
- progress made by schools causing concern should be evaluated carefully, and timely and robust interventions made where needed;
- in all schools where underachievement is identified, prompt attention should be given to, and priority focused on, raising standards;
- the progress towards effective school self-evaluation should be accelerated, and advisory staff should make a real contribution to developing school autonomy.

In order to improve support to pupils with special educational needs:

- the effectiveness of communications with schools should be improved regarding the strategy for inclusion, and support for this provided by including a clearer indication of the longer-term planned outcomes for the *All Together Better* project;
- pressure should be applied at the highest levels of the social services department and health trusts for an improvement in the timeliness of their advice as part of the statutory assessment process, so that children's needs can be provided for faster.

In order to improve the support for school management:

- the level of support available for newly appointed headteachers should be improved.

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