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CONTENTS

PARAGRAPHS

INTRODUCTION 1 - 3

COMMENTARY 4 - 11

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context 12 - 16

Performance 17 - 23

Funding 24 - 30

Council Structure 31 - 32

The Education Development Plan 33 - 37

The Allocation of Resources to Priorities 38 - 41

Recommendations

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Implications of Other Functions 42

Monitoring, Challenge, Support, Intervention 43 - 49

Collection and Analysis of Data 50 - 53

Support for Literacy 54 - 58

Support for Numeracy 59 - 63

Support for ICT 64 - 68

Support for Schools Causing Concern 69 - 71

Support for Governors 72 - 74

Support for School Management 75 - 78

Recommendations

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate Planning 79 - 83

Management Services 84 - 92

Recommendations

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION

Strategy 93 - 96

Statutory Obligations 97

School Improvement 98 - 100

Value for Money 101 - 103

Recommendations

SECTION 5: ACCESS

The Supply of School Places	104 - 108
Admissions	109
Attendance	110 - 113
Behaviour Support	114 - 117
Provision of Education Otherwise Than At School	118 - 121
Health, Safety, Welfare, Child Protection	122 - 124
Children in Public Care	125
Minority Ethnic Children	126 - 129
Social Exclusion	130 - 133
Recommendations	

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection was carried out by OFSTED in conjunction with the Audit Commission under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The inspection used the Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities which focuses on the effectiveness of Local Education Authority (LEA) work to support school improvement. 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 partly based on the data, some of which was provided by the LEA, on school inspection information and audit reports, on documentation and discussions with LEA members, staff in the education department and other representatives of the LEA's partners. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on aspects of the LEA's work was circulated to 94 schools. The response rate was 95 per cent.

3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to 13 primary, 5 secondary and 2 special schools. The visits tested the views of governors, headteachers and other staff on the key aspects of the LEA's strategy. The visits also considered whether the support which is provided by the LEA contributes to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to school improvement and provides value for money.

COMMENTARY

4. In social and economic terms, Gateshead is a diverse area but overall it is poorer than the nation as a whole and its adult population has fewer higher educational qualifications. Against this background, the schools are having some success. At the ages of 7 and 11, attainment in English, mathematics and science is broadly in line with national averages, as it is for English and science at the age of 14. In the GCSE it is below national average, but it is above the average for similar LEAs and improving faster than the national rate.

5. The decline of Gateshead's heavy engineering and mining economy has left the area with a need for regeneration to which the Council has responded vigorously. It has been successful in attracting regeneration funding and is using that funding to combat social exclusion in the schools. In secondary schools, where disengagement with education is usually most evident, attendance and behaviour are improving, so creating the conditions for further increase in examination success. In these matters, as in others, the authority is successful in targeting its resources on well-chosen priorities.

6. The leadership and strategic management provided by members and officers are strong and effective, and the priority given to education by the Council is underlined by the level of funding provided for it. There is a powerful sense of educational community in the borough. The nature of the relationship between the schools and the LEA, and the LEA's role in school improvement have been defined clearly. The schools and the authority have a common view of that role and relationship. They work together toward common goals in genuine partnership.

7. The following functions of the LEA are carried out effectively:

- support for literacy;
- support for numeracy;
- support for governors;
- the provision of support for pupils with special needs;
- providing for health and safety, welfare and child protection;
- improving behaviour;
- improving attendance;
- financial and personnel advice for schools; and
- planning school places.

8. These functions are exercised in a satisfactory way, but require some improvement:

- the deployment of advisory support to schools;
- support for schools causing concern;

- support for school management;
- the provision of a strategy for special educational needs;
- support for looked after children;
- the strategic planning of support for minority ethnic pupils; and
- education development planning.

9. These functions are not carried out effectively:

- support for schools in the use of performance data;
- the provision for pupils who have no school place;
- support for the teaching of information and communications technology (ICT);
and
- the maintenance of school buildings and grounds.

10. Gateshead's spending on education is towards the upper end of the range for metropolitan authorities. Its financial strategy is improving, particularly as it increases delegation. Almost without exception, its services provide sound value for money and, in several cases, the value provided is good.

11. Significant though the areas of weakness are, they are few in number and the areas of strength outweigh them. This is so, not least because, although performance management is not yet fully in place, the authority has analysed its performance, acted on the findings of the analysis and knows where further improvement is necessary. Moreover, it has improved even while undergoing its current, large scale programme of reorganisation. The LEA has the capacity to act on the recommendations made in this report.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

12. The borough of Gateshead, on the south bank of the River Tyne, consists of a mainly urban area around the town centre and a more rural area to the west. Its population is 199,000. Like other parts of the North East, it has seen the decline of a heavy industrial and mining economy. It has had some success in attracting regeneration funding, most recently for major arts developments, currently being completed along the Gateshead Quays.

13. Nevertheless, deprivation remains. Unemployment is 5.7 per cent. That is a rate lower than the rest of the region (7.3 per cent) but higher than that nationally (4.3 per cent). The 1991 census showed that fewer of Gateshead's citizens are in higher social classes or have higher educational qualifications than nationally. These average figures for the borough conceal wide variations within it. For example, in the 1997 figures, unemployment varied between 2.9 per cent in one ward and 12.2 per cent in another.

14. The school population, predicted to decline in the primary age range, is 30,700. In primary schools 26.4 per cent of the pupils are entitled to free school meals (FSM), compared with 20.5 per cent nationally. The equivalent figures for secondary schools are 24 per cent and 18.1 per cent. Inevitably these figures also mask variation. There are 12 primary schools with between 50 and 85 percent of their pupils eligible for FSM. Only 1.4 per cent of the pupils are from minority ethnic groups, compared with 11.7 per cent nationally. These figures do not include the children of the 4000 strong orthodox Jewish community of central Gateshead which has its own, independent, school system.

15. Gateshead provides 8 secondary schools for 11-18 year old pupils and 2 for 11-16 year olds. There are 76 primary, infant and junior schools, 1 nursery school and 5 special schools. Fewer of Gateshead's pupils have statements of special educational need (SEN) than nationally: 2.1 per cent of primary pupils and 3.1 per cent of secondary pupils, compared with the national 2.6 per cent and 3.9 per cent.

16. There are pre-school places for all four year olds whose parents want one, and in 1998/99, 74.2 per cent of three and four year olds were in nursery classes. The LEA has had some success in raising its percentage of Post-16 students staying on in sixth forms or Further Education (FE) from 53 per cent in 1993 to 63 per cent in 1999.

Performance

17. The baseline test used by the LEA shows that the average attainment of children entering schools in Gateshead is slightly lower than the average for the seven other north eastern LEAs that use the same test.

18. At the end of Key Stage 1, the percentages of pupils achieving Level 2 and above in the national curriculum tests in reading, writing and mathematics are broadly in line with the national averages and those for similar LEAs. For those gaining Level 3 or better, a similar picture applies in reading and mathematics, but a smaller percentage than both the national and the similar LEA averages achieve at this level in writing.

19. In English, mathematics and science at the end of Key Stage 2, the proportion attaining test results at Level 4 or better in recent years has been close to both the national average and to that for similar LEAs. In 1999 in English and mathematics there were significant improvements and the national and similar LEA averages were exceeded.

20. Attainment at Level 5 or better in English and science at the end of Key Stage 3 is broadly in line with the national average, while a smaller proportion than nationally achieve this in mathematics. In all three subjects the proportion achieving Level 6 or better is slightly higher than in similar LEAs.

21. The proportion of pupils gaining 5 or more grades A*-C in the GCSE shows a steady improvement from 34.3 per cent in 1994 to 41.7 per cent in 1999. These percentages are below the national averages but above the averages for similar LEAs. The rate of improvement over the same period is greater than both national and similar LEA rate.

22. Inspection evidence indicates that the proportion of good primary schools is higher than nationally and considerably higher than in similar LEAs, with few needing a lot of improvement. Inspection of secondary schools provides an even more positive picture. Eighty-three per cent of Gateshead schools were judged to be good or very good overall, compared with 66 per cent nationally and 58 per cent in similar LEAs. Only one school was found to need much improvement.

23. Attendance and unauthorised absence in primary schools are broadly in line with the national average, but in secondary schools attendance is below the national average, and unauthorised absence above it. The LEA has been successful in recent years in reducing the rate of permanent exclusions, particularly in secondary schools where it is currently less than half the national average.

Funding

24. Gateshead has consistently spent above its Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) for all its services, including education. For 2000/01 the budget is four per cent above SSA.

25. In 1999/00 the Local Schools Budget (LSB), which is the total revenue spending on schools, was £2526 per pupil, above the average for metropolitan authorities. The delegated budget was close to the average at £1582 per primary and £2214 per secondary pupil but only 76.6 per cent of LSB was delegated to schools compared with the average for metropolitan authorities of 80.2 per cent. This made Gateshead one of the lowest delegating authorities in England.

26. Delegation has increased in 2000/01 to 83.4 per cent of the LSB and meets the requirements of the fair funding regime. Combined with the increase in education SSA, which has also been passed on, there is an overall increase in delegated funding per pupil of 13.4 per cent.

27. In 1999/00 centrally retained funding for statutory and regulatory duties was £180, well above £132 which is average for metropolitan authorities. For the 2000/01 year Gateshead has reduced this to £132 and, by delegating funding for school meals, it has reduced centrally retained expenditure on access from £152 per pupil to £82.

28. Capital expenditure on education has risen considerably over recent years, funded through a combination of borrowing, asset sales and government grant. At £287 per pupil in 1999/00, capital expenditure was almost double the average for metropolitan authorities.

29. There is good consultation with schools over budget setting. This year the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council met with schools to explain the issues facing the Council as it set its budget. Schools appreciated the openness. There is, however, no published financial plan for future years. This makes the schools' own forward planning difficult. Final budget information comes to schools late. They get indicative budgets for the next financial year a little before Christmas based on pupil numbers, but no early indication of the affect of budget changes until their final budget arrives.

30. The funding formula for schools has not been extensively revised since the introduction of Local Management In Schools (LMS) in the early 1990s. A major review is now underway with the help of external consultants. It includes the review of funding for SEN.

Council Structure

31. Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC) has 66 members, of whom 47 are Labour and 19 Liberal Democrat. In 1999 the Council reorganised itself, setting up an 11 member cabinet responsible, pending new legislation, to a politically representative Executive Committee. The political responsibility for schools is carried by the portfolio holder for educational achievement supported by other cabinet members who have responsibility for lifelong learning and children and young people. Discussion with the wider membership of the MBC and with others with an interest in educational matters occurs in advisory groups with briefs for educational achievement, school liaison, and lifelong learning. The membership of these consists of a political balance of councillors, together with headteachers, governors, teachers and diocesan representatives, supported by relevant officers.

32. The consultative style of the cabinet is ensuring good communication with a wide range of interested parties. This has been facilitated by the system of advisory groups, which is a strength of the Council's political structure. Partly through these groups, and partly through other forums, there is now increased direct contact between members and headteachers.

The Education Development Plan

33. Gateshead's Education Development Plan (EDP) has seven priorities for school improvement:

- (i) to raise standards of literacy for all pupils;
- (ii) to raise standards of numeracy for all pupils;
- (iii) to enhance learning skills through information technology;
- (iv) to enhance the quality of governance, leadership and management in schools;
- (v) to improve attendance and behaviour;
- (vi) to improve the quality of teaching and learning in all key stages, especially in Key Stage 2; and
- (vii) to improve attainment and progress in all key stages, especially Key Stage 4.

34. The first version of the plan, though basically sound, had some weaknesses which have been dealt with following the first round of the LEA's appraisal of the plan's implementation. The links between the analysis of the pupils' performance and the proposed activities to improve it have been strengthened. For example, the first version of the plan did not place the emphasis on improving pupils' writing which would have been justified by the analysis of performance. The revised plan put this right. The second version of the plan has a sharper focus on attainment. The LEA's evaluation of the plan and the actions taken on it are good.

35. Nevertheless, there remain weaknesses. The targets set by the schools do not aggregate to the LEA's literacy target for 2000. Most of the activity plans set out clear and quantifiable criteria for measuring success, but the proposals for improving ICT have much vaguer success criteria which do not relate to pupils' attainment. There is also a weak link in the plan's treatment of SEN. Although the plan sets out its proposals for improving provision clearly in the required annex on SEN, it fails to show how SEN will be addressed in the activity plans themselves. The plan is also not explicit enough about how the achievement of children in public care and of minority ethnic pupils is to be raised.

36. These specific weaknesses are outweighed by the plan's wider strengths. Overall, it is coherent, feasible and addresses specific identified weaknesses. Its costing is sound. In many respects also there is clear evidence that the LEA is making progress with its implementation. This is particularly so of work on literacy, numeracy, attendance and behaviour.

37. Both the first draft of the plan and its subsequent revision were subject to an effective process of consultation. During the inspection, the school visits and discussions with headteachers, other teachers, governors and parents showed that the plan carries widespread support in the local educational community. That support provides an essential pre-condition for the successful implementation of the plan.

The Allocation of Resources to Priorities

38. Education is a high priority for this LEA and expenditure is allocated accordingly. Within the budget high priority is given to early years education, Post-16 provision and community education. Capital spending is high; this reflects the Council's long standing commitment to improving the quality of its buildings, including schools.

39. The Council sees education as an important part of social and economic regeneration. The LEA has successfully bid for external funding from the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), European funds and the national lottery. Successful programmes to re-engage young people in learning and to improve attendance are running at three secondary schools funded by SRB and the standards fund. The education service will receive SRB funding of £706,000 in 1999/00 and £1,204,000 in 2000/01 to fund these and other projects. Gateshead is a pilot authority for the introduction of Post-16 education maintenance allowances and there are early signs that the money is enabling more young people to continue their education. Gateshead has been selected to participate in the next round of Excellence in Cities and this will provide additional resources.

40. The LEA is pressing ahead with the introduction of Best Value. Support services for schools are to be subjected to fundamental reviews over the next three years. Two pilot reviews covering School Crossing Patrols and SEN Transport were somewhat inconclusive but the authority has learned a great deal about the Best Value process from them and is now well prepared to move forward.

41. The MBC is continuing to introduce major change in its arrangements for planning and evaluation. Each service is required to prepare an annual service plan which incorporates targets. Services produce an extensive range of performance indicators. These are monitored quarterly by managers and members receive six monthly progress reports. In order for Gateshead to benefit fully from the introduction of Best Value, as the system develops it will be necessary to review the performance indicators to ensure that they are an accurate reflection of the important features of service performance.

Recommendations

In order to improve the strategy for school improvement:

- provide schools with earlier information about their budgets each year in order to help them plan their spending and provide them with forward budget projections so that they can plan further ahead; and
- improve the EDP by showing how the activity plans contribute to meeting SEN, how the activity plan for ICT is expected to improve pupils' attainment, and how the attainment of ethnic minority children and those in public care is to be raised.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Implications of other functions

42. Support for school improvement in Gateshead is generally effective and, in many respects, is improving. There are some specific weaknesses, for example in support for ICT and for the use of performance data but these are outweighed by strengths. The services which support SEN are generally deployed in such a way as to promote school improvement. The LEA has made a good start on tackling social exclusion, reducing its impact on attendance and overall standards attained, particularly in secondary schools and Post-16. Support to improve behaviour and the attainment of minority ethnic pupils is deployed effectively. Financial and personnel services are good and allow senior managers in the schools to focus their attention on school improvement. The LEA plans its provision of school places so as to avoid waste. Together its services support one another and are sound and effective.

Monitoring, challenge, support, intervention

43. The LEA sets out its intended relationship with schools with great clarity (paragraph 79). The matters of monitoring, challenge, support and intervention have been discussed widely and the visits to schools showed that the schools understand the issues involved except that, in some schools, the meaning of “challenge” is seen to refer only to the process by which the suitability of performance targets is questioned, rather than to broader matters of improving teaching and management.

44. Until recently, arrangements for monitoring schools have lacked consistency, and the identification of schools in need of intervention and support has been less reliable than it should be (paragraph 70). Weaknesses in monitoring arrangements were identified in the LEA’s self review (paragraph 81) and changes have been and are being introduced. The former advisory service has been reorganised as the standards and effectiveness division (SED) to carry the main responsibility for the exercise of the LEA’s monitoring, challenge and support functions. As part of the restructuring, the number of inspector/adviser posts is being reduced from 14 to 11 and an extensive programme of early retirement is leading to substantial changes of personnel. Role definitions for inspectors/link advisers are now much clearer than formerly, and a new management structure has been introduced. Early evidence indicates that leadership and management of the division are proving effective and there is a high level of enthusiasm and commitment among inspectors for their re-defined roles.

45. The reorganisation of SED is leading to a better balance of specialisms and expertise within the team which is more reflective of the needs of schools. Given the size of the LEA, it is inevitable that there will be some gaps in

coverage and SED has made arrangements with nearby LEAs and private sources to broaden the range of expertise available to the schools.

46. All schools receive a half-day monitoring visit each half-term from the link inspector. Although this support is not differentiated, schools value the contact. The visits end with oral feedback which the schools find useful, and written reports containing a good deal of evaluative comment and usually recommendations for action are sent to the school following the visit. The guidance provided within SED on the writing of these reports is good. It includes clear indicators to identify schools causing concern. Link inspector visits for specific monitoring purposes are usually guided by detailed notes, but the school visits showed that there are inconsistencies in the ways judgements are made. There is insufficient internal training to produce consistency. Clearly the need for this will become more pressing with the changes in personnel.

47. A system of supportive reviews supplements the regular link inspector visits. Each school is entitled to such a review in the year following its OFSTED inspection, and in addition may purchase a supportive review of any aspect of its work under its service level agreement with SED. In addition to the six monitoring visits, for which costs are met through LEA centrally held budgets, and the more formal purchased supportive reviews, schools may receive other visits from inspectors for a variety of purposes, some of them costed against the school's budget and others not. Headteachers are not always clear about the costing basis of these visits, and at present there appears to be no consistency either in the allocation of this additional time to schools or in the purpose of all the visits. Reviews do not always lead to the agreement of improvement targets with the result that the outcomes of review are not adequately monitored.

48. Schools are encouraged to engage in self reviews and the LEA provides help and support in this. In addition to arranging for training to be provided, the LEA has seconded a headteacher to assist with the work.

49. Pending the introduction of a common system for the whole Council, there is at present no formal appraisal system in SED. Although there are opportunities to obtain the views of headteachers and teachers about the effectiveness of the work of SED, the arrangements are not systematic. There is no thorough evaluation system. However, given its recent establishment and the changes in personnel which are taking place, SED is contributing effectively to the schools and offers sound value for money.

Collection and analysis of data

50. A performance management and statistics (PMS) unit has been established within SED, with the responsibility of analysing schools' performance data both for schools and for inspectors. It has made good progress in establishing a well-managed database and in providing performance data for schools which enables them to compare the performance of their pupils with

pupils in other schools in the LEA and specifically with other schools of similar size and with similar FSM entitlement. However, there is insufficient guidance provided to help schools make the most effective use of this data and, as a result, the service does not provide good value.

51. As a result of recent consultation with headteachers, the data provided has been helpfully reduced and simplified. It is now embodied in a school profile that usefully contains other information about resources deployment to enable headteachers and governors to see how a range of similar schools compares with their own in these respects. However, schools are not identified and this hinders schools use of the data.

52. The guidance currently provided is inadequate and there is wide variation in the use made in schools of the data provided, and in their understanding of how it can be used in the management of improvement. A well-planned training course on raising standards through the use of assessment data is beginning to improve this situation, but at present schools are far from clear about the uses which can be made of the data, and few are using it to identify specific areas of strength and weakness in order to reinforce or remedy them.

53. The most common use of the performance data is alongside teacher assessments as a starting point from which to set targets. The EDP sets out a detailed process for target setting but in several of the primary schools visited there was insufficient understanding of the difference between a forecast and a target. In practice, targets determined chiefly by predicting on the base of prior attainment often act as ceilings of expectation and fail to challenge schools and teachers to search for improved strategies to increase attainment. Link inspectors visit schools in the autumn term to discuss proposed targets. These targets are frequently challenged but there is inconsistency in following up these challenges, and schools are often left either with higher targets in which they have no faith, or with defended targets that are unlikely to extend their work. This is usually because the discussion is too closely tied to the accuracy of interpretation of earlier results at the expense of a consideration of alternative ways of working which would lead to improvement in the school. A high proportion of schools exceeded both their 2000 targets in their achievements in 1999, often by a sizeable margin, while a significant number failed to reach their targets.

Support for Literacy

54. The LEA has rightly made raising standards of literacy the first priority for improvement in the EDP. It has set an ambitious target that, by 2002, 85 per cent of pupils leaving primary schools will attain Level 4 or better in English. Sixty-nine per cent achieved this in 1999: the target requires a very large increase.

55. The arrangements made to implement the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) are good. A senior inspector, supported by a literacy consultant and an advisory teacher, manages the strategy very effectively and the resources available are deployed to good effect. The action plan is thorough, detailed and contains clear evaluation criteria. Arrangements for monitoring the effectiveness of the work are well-conceived and include a steering group on which schools are represented.

56. The initial and subsequent training has been effective and support for schools has been well-differentiated according to need. The sharing of good practice between schools is helped by a directory of expert literacy teachers willing to accept visits from colleagues, and increasing use is being made of this. Training of support assistants through the Literacy Strategy has been effective, and is making a valuable contribution. A well-equipped learning skills centre contains a good range of literacy support materials and is extensively used by teachers. Overall, literacy support in primary schools is based on a well-judged implementation of the NLS, and standards, particularly in the schools that have benefited from intensive support, are improving in most aspects of the work. The weakest aspect of literacy in most schools continues to be the quality of pupils' writing, and the support work is now being modified to give this greater attention

57. Work to support literacy in secondary schools is already well-established in anticipation of the LEA's participation in the Key Stage 3 pilot. Summer schools have been established. Particular attention has been paid to tackling the issue of the difference in literacy achievement of boys and girls, and schemes have been promoted in both primary and secondary schools to improve literacy levels for boys.

58. In response to the schools' survey, three-quarters of primary schools and almost seven-tenths of secondary schools rated the authority's support for literacy as good or very good, and none considered it less than satisfactory. This endorsement confirms the evidence of this inspection that the support for literacy in Gateshead schools is of a very high standard.

Support for Numeracy

59. Raising standards in numeracy for all pupils is the second priority for improvement in the EDP. The target that by 2002, 78 per cent of pupils leaving primary schools should gain Level 4 or better in numeracy is less challenging than that set by several similar LEAs and is in marked contrast with the much higher target set for literacy. Its modesty is even more emphasised by the 1999 results when 70 per cent of pupils attained Level 4 or better, somewhat higher than the national average of 68.2 per cent.

60. A good start has been made on the implementation of the National Numeracy Strategy (NNS) which is already having a positive impact in schools.

The management of the strategy is carried out well by an experienced inspector, with the support of two numeracy consultants. The action plan is good, with clear targets and success indicators, and planning is based on an analysis of needs carried out through visits to schools before the launch of the strategy.

61. As with literacy, the differentiation of support is good. Training has been effective and has given particular attention to updating teachers' understanding of mathematics, a need revealed in the pre-strategy audit. Schools are increasingly making use of the register of leading mathematics teachers, which currently consists of 11 teachers including one in a special school, and of the recently added mathematics resources in the learning skills centre.

62. Standards in mathematics in secondary schools, although still lower than the national average, show a faster rate of improvement in Gateshead schools than nationally. Whereas 47.6 per cent of Year 9 pupils gained Level 5 or better in 1995, by 1999 this had risen to 54 per cent. The LEA's participation in the Key Stage 3 pilot has made possible the appointment of a third numeracy consultant, and three days training for heads of mathematics departments has just taken place. Some schools have purchased supportive reviews to help with the development of their work in mathematics. Three numeracy summer schools were provided in 1999, and the secondary schools responsible report that these were successful both in attendance rates and in the work undertaken.

63. The start which has been made on the NNS is impressive and the support provided to the schools is of good quality.

Support for ICT

64. Standards of attainment in ICT and its use in the curriculum are weak in a high proportion of both primary and secondary schools in Gateshead. The LEA's own audit in 1997 identified weaknesses in teachers' skills and knowledge and in the provision of equipment, particularly in primary schools. The ICT development plan, building on the national targets for the National Grid for Learning (NGfL), sets out a well-judged four-year programme to remedy both of these deficiencies. Some of its targets and criteria for success are too vague to be useable as reliable indicators of what has been achieved.

65. In spite of delay caused by contracting difficulties, implementation of NGfL provision is now on target. Training is taking place and schools have been helped to prepare their own ICT policies and development plans. It is a strong feature of Gateshead's support for ICT in schools that special schools have been, and continue to be, fully integrated in all aspects of the development. Moreover, some schools in conjunction with Gateshead college are making their ICT resources available for wider community use, often being surprised by the volume of response. This is helping schools strengthen their links with their local communities.

66. The main focus of training to date has been to enhance the confidence and competence of teachers in the use of computers. A wider range of support will be necessary in order to achieve the objective set out in the EDP of "raising pupils' attainment in and with ICT". At present, this element of the development plan has not been implemented adequately. A limited amount of work has taken place to develop the use of ICT as a means of improving learning skills and knowledge across the curriculum, but much more remains to be done, and it is lack of support for this aspect of development which is responsible for the critical responses of many schools to the schools survey. At present too much of the limited resources available to support curriculum developments in ICT in schools is consumed in the managing of the hardware implementation of NGfL at the expense of curriculum support and the value provided by the work is poor.

67. To facilitate administrative ICT, the LEA established an Intranet to enable electronic communication between the education department and schools some four years ago. This was linked to a locally designed financial management system. Schools had considerable difficulties with this locally designed system and the LEA has now decided to purchase new financial management software.

68. Computers for school administration have been provided, together with support services. Schools value the technical support they receive from the education department but the support service provided by the finance department remains centrally funded and controlled and there is no service level agreement. Some schools make greater demands and receive greater benefit from the service than others. At times there is not enough help available to meet schools' needs.

Support for Schools Causing Concern

69. As a result of inspections since 1993, five schools have been found to require special measures; four are primary schools and the other a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) which was placed in this category in spring 2000. Of these, one primary school and the PRU remain in the category. In addition, two secondary and four other primary schools have been identified as having serious weaknesses, though of these all but one, which has only recently been placed in the category, have made significant improvement. More recently, the LEA has established two further categories, one of schools which it has identified as causing concern and the other of schools needing additional challenge and support. The first currently applies to three schools, and the second to eight.

70. In the past, the LEA's support for schools causing concern has not always been good. In some cases the LEA did not identify the problems before the inspection drew attention to them, and in at least two schools' governors had no advance warning of the difficulties. The length of time taken to improve the weakest was also too long. These shortcomings were recognised in the LEA's

self review and, as part of the review of the EDP, a new strategy has been prepared and discussed with headteachers. The new arrangements are set out in a strategy document which contains a helpful and comprehensive list of characteristics to identify schools giving cause for concern and sets out a graduated set of intervention, support and monitoring levels to be applied to schools with varying degrees of difficulty along with the nature and quantity of support to be provided for the schools and the time limits for improvement. The strategy also emphasises the importance of informing and involving governors from the earliest stages.

71. The newly introduced strategy for the identification, support and monitoring of schools causing concern is soundly conceived and, when fully implemented has the potential to resolve the problems which the LEA formerly had in this aspect of its work and so provide effective support.

Support for Governors

72. The support provided for governing bodies (GBs) is strong and provides good value. That is indicated by the school survey and by the high proportions of GBs subscribing to the LEA's governors' training service (80 per cent of primary and 93.5 per cent of secondary GBs) and to the clerking service (93 per cent of primary and 90 per cent of secondary GBs). It is confirmed by the views expressed in discussion with governors during the inspection. Governors also value the governors' newsletter, the openness of officers and the forum for discussion provided by their meetings with chairs of GBs and headteachers.

73. The clerking service is particularly strong, functioning as a further channel of communication between the education department and the GBs as well as servicing governors' administrative needs. Governors are also appreciative of the advice they receive from LEA officers when the GB has a particular need for support, for example, after the school has been identified as causing concern or where a new headteacher is to be appointed.

74. The LEA offers two types of training for governors. There is a centrally organised and located programme of, usually evening, courses and each school buying into the training programme is also offered one bespoke course on an individual basis. The LEA is currently seeking to increase attendance at its central courses. Both types of training are used and valued by governors but apart from the training for newly appointed governors and some courses dealing with new national or local initiatives, they find the bespoke training more useful and convenient than that which is organised centrally.

Support for School Management

75. The LEA's support for school management is basically sound but it requires some improvement to increase the autonomy of headteachers as evaluators of their own schools and the clarity with which they focus on improving standards.

76. The main element of its support for school managers is seen, by the education department, to be the work of the link adviser through regular visits to the schools. Additionally, the LEA provides a programme of centrally organised courses, encourages use of the national training programmes for serving and aspiring headteachers and organises an annual conference for all Gateshead headteachers. These conferences are highly valued by the headteachers and help to produce the strong sense of educational community in the borough which was evident from the school visits and from the group discussions with headteachers and governors.

77. The education department sees the current priorities in developing school management to be to improve schools' capacity to evaluate themselves and to sharpen their use of data to improve teaching. The inspection has shown the priorities to be well-chosen but by no means fully implemented. Schools' awareness has been raised but the education department has some way to go to lead all schools to produce and operate consistent and effective approaches. Some schools use the LEA's recommended system for self-evaluation, others use their own systems. The schools vary in the effectiveness with which their arrangements for self-evaluation are directed at raising standards. Similar variation in effectiveness is evident in schools' use of management information. Pending the expected national guidance, appraisal both of headteachers and their teaching staffs no longer happens consistently. Sixty-three per cent of schools are currently carrying out some sort of appraisal system; the remainder are not and so lack an important tool with which to improve teaching.

78. These problems notwithstanding, the LEA's support for schools' capacity to manage improvement was satisfactory in 11 of the 20 schools visited and good in 6 of them. It was somewhat better in secondary schools than in primaries. In responding to the survey, primary schools showed themselves to be less satisfied with the LEA's support for management, target setting and self-evaluation than were secondaries. The LEA is rightly seeking to increase the expertise of the advisory service in primary school management.

Recommendations

In order to make school improvement more effective:

- ensure that schools better understand the scope of the LEA's responsibility to challenge them in order to stimulate improvement;

- ensure consistency in the allocation of visits to schools and that the schools are clear about the purpose and cost basis of all visits;
- introduce more systematic evaluation of the work of SED;
- more specific guidance on ways in which performance data can be used in the management of school improvement should be provided and schools' understanding of the difference between a forecast and a target should be clarified;
- the monitoring criteria statements in the ICT development plan should be made more precise so that they can be used more effectively to assess the progress made;
- increase the support for schools to improve the quality of teaching and learning through ICT, providing alternative ways of managing the hardware aspects of NGfL provision;
- change the basis on which computer services and support are provided to schools, providing a clear service level agreement and delegating the funding for the services to schools;
- expand the training programme offered to individual GBs; and
- improve school managers' evaluation of the work of their schools so that it has a clearer focus on raising attainment.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate Planning

79. The strategic management of the LEA is of a very high standard. It operates within a clear and coherent framework of policy and planning. Gateshead MBC publishes its corporate strategy in a document entitled, "Beyond 2000." This sets out 10 broad priorities which include "to enable local people to learn and develop throughout their lives, raising levels of educational achievement for all ages". The LEA's policy and priorities, drawn up within this overall framework, are published in the Education Strategic Development Plan for the years 1999-2002. The plan has considerable strengths. It defines the basis of the LEA's relationship with schools in what it calls "Gateshead Education Partnership" by setting out the respective obligations of the schools and the LEA in terms which are explicit and build upon the government's code of practice for the relationship. It also sets out the major strands of the LEA's work intended to deliver its educational vision, showing how its various plans, including the EDP, relate to one another. Finally, it specifies the LEA's key priorities for the current year and the performance indicators against which the success of its work will be judged. In a crisply written and well-designed leaflet, the strategy has been widely circulated among the schools. All of those visited were familiar with it, at least in general terms, and approved of its priorities.

80. The delivery of this strategy and of the MBC's wider priorities is reflected in the structure of the Council's cabinet and the re-structuring of the education department itself, now forming part of the Culture and Learning Group which is one of the five new groups of departments into which the MBC's services have been organised. The reorganisation is in train but not complete, and it is too soon to judge the effectiveness of the new arrangements. Nevertheless, early indications are good and the LEA has been able to improve even while undergoing this extensive reorganisation. Within the education department, a series of strategic and other working groups has been set up to deliver the key priorities. Each of the services plans its activities clearly in terms of the overall educational priorities and, for the most part, with specific measurable criteria against which success may be assessed. There remains, however, some variation in the rigour of this planning and the evaluation element of performance management is not yet fully in place. For example, the appraisal system is not yet operational.

81. This is not to say that evaluation is neglected at present but rather that the system needs further development. A culture of evaluation and improvement of the department's work exists currently and, in the autumn of 1999 a self-review of the department was conducted, using the services of an external consultant. The broad findings of the evaluation and the actions taken and planned as a result of it are consistent with the findings of this inspection. The LEA has a sound knowledge of its strengths and weaknesses.

82. The political leadership of the LEA is strong and carries widespread support in the educational community. Lines of accountability for members and officers in the new system of political organisation are clear. Members value the high quality of advice they are given by officers and the process of decision making is brisk and effective. The Director and his officers manage the education department with skill and with clear purpose. The LEA is led well.

83. For the most part, the education department also works well with other departments of the MBC and with external partners. This is particularly so of the work it does as its part of regeneration in the borough (paragraphs 131 and 132). There is effective collaboration with the MBC's social services department in some areas. Collaboration with the health authority and police is also effective.

Management Services

84. The LEA has produced a prospectus of 27 different services that are available for purchase by schools during 2000/01. Following consultation with schools, the provisional prospectus was circulated in February. Costs were not included until the final version was sent out in late March and this left schools with too little time to explore other providers.

85. Good quality financial support and advice is provided through the budget officer service which has been offered to schools on a traded basis since the early days of LMS. The schools are satisfied with the service which also covers the statutory responsibilities of the LEA to monitor school budgets.

86. The school survey indicated that school budget statements were not clear and that consultation on the LMS scheme was unsatisfactory, but the school visits showed that both consultation and statements have improved significantly this year.

87. All schools receive final accounts, prepared by the finance team in the education department, at the end of the financial year. LEA officers monitor school budgets effectively. Those schools which end the year with a budget surplus of more than five per cent of budget share are required to say how they propose to use the money.

88. The education and finance departments provide satisfactory payroll, creditor's and debtor's services. The money for these services was delegated for the first time this year so schools have not yet had the opportunity to consider alternative suppliers. The internal audit service regularly check schools' financial administration, preparing detailed reports and recommendations for improvement.

89. The personnel team in the education department provides a good service. It is responsive when schools need help, particularly in matters of reorganisation,

in competency procedures and in making staff appointments. However, policy guidance on new developments is sometimes slow to appear and the schools' personnel manual is not always updated promptly.

90. Grounds and buildings maintenance services have been major weaknesses and were identified as such in the self-review. New management systems have been introduced and liaison with schools improved. It will take time and the introduction of effective performance management to build the confidence of schools in the service but a start has been made.

91. The Council's public works department has been the major contractor for the repair and maintenance of school buildings. It has not provided a consistently satisfactory service. Schools have experienced slow responses; high costs and work not properly finished off. Following the review of its services the LEA has established a 'one stop shop' to which schools can refer all property enquiries and have them followed up more effectively. In due course the 'shop' will hold a list of approved external contractors. It will be important that effective systems are in place to ensure that targets for improvement are met. At present also there is no effective strategic approach to the management of school property (paragraph 108).

92. The majority of schools buy cleaning from the Council's environmental services department which provides a satisfactory service. The school meals contract was recently re-tendered and won by the Council's in-house team. The new contract started in January and although some schools report an improvement in service it is too early to make a definitive judgement.

iii Recommendations

In order to improve strategic management:

- improve the evaluation of the LEA's work by further developing the system of performance management;
- ensure that schools receive good, prompt and cost effective building maintenance and grounds maintenance services; and
- ensure that future information for schools about traded services, including costs, is circulated well in advance of the start of the contract period.

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION

Strategy

93. Gateshead has a long established approach for meeting the special educational needs of pupils in mainstream schools wherever possible. The current SEN policy is clear, relevant and meets statutory requirements. It is supported by the schools but fails to define how all pupils will have their needs met through the inclusive approach. The policy is being revised to deal with this but there is no agreed time-scale for the completion of the revision.

94. The authority has a good range of provision for SEN which was reorganised in 1997. In addition to its five special schools, in the last six years the LEA has established a rapidly growing number of support bases, attached to mainstream schools, for a wide range of disabilities. The LEA also works with neighbouring authorities to plan special school provision on a regional basis. The majority of placements outside the borough are met through a regional consortium that regularly monitors and evaluates provision. The authority plays an active role in this network, seeking to enable sound and cost-effective decisions to be made on pupil placements. Nevertheless, the number of pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties placed in special schools out of the borough remains costly.

95. Support for SEN is primarily delivered through the pupil services division. Services within the division generally work well together. There is a comprehensive handbook and a pupil services action plan, drawn from the individual service action plans, which identify how the policy will be implemented across the services and in schools. However, the individual plans vary in the extent to which they set out precise targets for action.

96. Multi-agency working between the education department and other key services is not as well-established. There are pockets of excellence, for example in collaborative pre-school SEN provision. Nevertheless, the overall strategic planning and integration of the work of the LEA, Social Services and the Health Trust are underdeveloped. Despite willingness by all parties to co-operate and work together, the absence of shared protocols and joint training to support and manage the required changes have delayed progress.

Statutory Obligations

97. The authority has made significant progress in the last two years to improve its compliance with the SEN Code of Practice. It is now successful in meeting its statutory obligations, with a good record of completing 95 per cent of statements (excluding exceptions) within the required period. Statements have improved and now specify appropriate provision. Nevertheless, many schools were concerned that, whilst amendments to educational statements are made,

implementation of the recommendations can take some time. The administration team has responded to this need by appointing a principal officer to handle the backlog of work. This is beginning to be effective. Special school and mainstream headteachers are also concerned that the provision of Speech and Language Therapy outlined in educational statements is not being met. In many cases schools did not receive their full allocation of this provision, nor, in some cases, did pupils with statements receive their entitlement.

School improvement

98. For the most part schools feel well supported by the LEA and judge provision favourably. The education psychology service (EPS) is well regarded by schools and is effective in providing advice and guidance to teachers. Support for sensory impaired pupils is generally highly valued by schools. Most primary schools visited were satisfied with support from the special needs support services (SNSS); a third felt they received good support. However, some schools registered a concern about the waiting lists for pupils to be seen by SNSS; with some pupils having to wait up to six months.

99. Although there is no co-ordinated training programme for Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators, a number of them commented positively on the LEA's support network. The advisory teacher attached to the SNSS, though well regarded, cannot fully meet current demand for consultancy. The appointment of a SEN inspector from September will help address this and enable target setting for special schools to be implemented.

100. The mainstream support bases are well established. Schools in general welcome the provision and those schools visited with bases reported benefits for both the host school and pupils within the bases. Many have now been established for some years and are able to advise teachers setting up new bases. Future developments are to focus on providing bases for physical disabilities.

Value for Money

101. The current review of formula funding (paragraph 30) is not yet complete and, at present, provision across the borough is inequitable. Currently pupils with a similar disability are funded differently in mainstream support bases and special schools. Half the primary schools visited were unclear about the SEN component of their budget and in half of these cases the school's use of that budget had not been monitored by the LEA. The monitoring of secondary schools' use of SEN budgets and resources was equally inconsistent. The LEA is not, therefore, helping all schools to develop their ability to manage support for SEN effectively and to prepare for increased delegation.

102. The high level of out of region placements is being addressed by officers. There are plans to reduce it and to rationalise the regional provision, particularly for Emotional Behaviour Difficulties (EBD). The LEA has set a target of reducing out of region placements for EBD by 15 per cent by 2002.

103. SEN provision is well-managed and although the costs of out-borough placements for EBD are above average, funding levels are broadly in line with similar LEAs. Given the overall costs of services and the quality of support to schools, the LEA's services to support SEN provides sound value for money.

Recommendations:

In order to improve support for SEN:

- planning for inclusion should specify how all pupils are to have their needs met;
- multi-agency working should be improved by implementing a strategic plan showing the arrangements for working together;
- plans to reduce out of borough placements and ensure increased levels of both Borough and regional provision, particularly with regard to EBD provision should be implemented;
- there should be equitable funding across the types of provision for specific disabilities; and
- the delegation of funds to schools should be clarified and consistent, effective mechanisms for monitoring schools' expenditure and provision for SEN should be developed.

SECTION 5: ACCESS

The Supply of School Places

104. The LEA has a strong commitment to early years education and is able to offer a nursery place to all four-year-olds and the majority of three-year-olds whose parents request it. It has written and implemented an Infant Class Size Plan and no Key Stage 1 pupil will be in a class of more than 30 from September 2000, a year ahead of the Government target.

105. The LEA has prepared a school organisation plan, which was agreed by the school organisation committee in September 1999. The plan is able to build on a strong recent record of removing surplus places. In January 1998 there were 20.3 per cent surplus places in secondary schools. The LEA closed two schools to reduce this to 4.7 per cent in January 2000. Surplus places in primary schools have been reduced from 11.1 per cent to 8.7 per cent over the same period. With the primary roll set to decline further, there will be a continuing need for action.

106. Eight of the 10 secondary schools have sixth forms. A grant has been awarded by the DfEE to construct innovative Lifelong Learning centres alongside the two 11-16 schools to enable them to provide for Post-16 students and for adult learners. Four of the sixth forms have fewer than 150 students; at this size the provision of a suitably broad curriculum poses problems although schools are working with the local FE college in order to broaden their curricular offer.

107. There has been good investment in improving school buildings and constructing new ones. In the last 10 years five primary schools have been re-built and 14 have had major extension or refurbishment. Special schools have been refurbished in the light of the re-organisation; five secondary schools have been extended and modernised and four adapted for specialist college status. A further three secondary schools will benefit from resources released by the most recent phase of secondary school closure.

108. The asset management plan is progressing. Condition surveys are complete but the results have not yet been fed back to schools. Suitability surveys are underway and a computer system has been purchased to hold the database of premises information. Although this progress has been made, there is no overall strategy agreed with the schools for the management of land and buildings.

Admissions

109. The system is based on neighbourhood schools serving defined catchment areas. Voluntary aided schools draw pupils from a wider area and include religious affiliation among their admissions criteria. This approach has

made admissions processes generally straightforward. However, in some parts of the borough pressure for places at particular secondary schools is beginning to cause problems. The LEA recognises this and is starting to consider how admissions criteria might be revised. Appeals processes are administered efficiently. In 1999 they did continue into August but, in the current year, there is every sign that they will be complete by mid-June. The system is sound.

Attendance

110. Levels of attendance in Gateshead primary schools have been in line with the national average and with similar LEAs for three of the last four years. They dropped very slightly in 1999. Attendance in secondary schools has been rising slowly, in line with the national rate, though in 1999 (89.9 per cent) remained below the national average (91.1 per cent). Levels of unauthorised absence reflect a similar pattern, though unauthorised absence in secondary schools is lower than in similar LEAs.

111. The LEA has a clear commitment to improving attendance. It has set itself more demanding targets than required by the DfEE and there is recent evidence of more rapid improvement in overall rates of secondary attendance. The strategy for improving attendance is effective. It is well integrated into other relevant key plans. Both the EDP and the Behaviour Support Plan (BSP) contain clear and practical actions to improve attendance in order to achieve the LEA's overall targets. The education welfare service (EWS) plays a key role in the LEA's approach to multi-agency working to tackle problems of social exclusion. There is effective liaison and co-ordination between the EWS and other relevant services and good working relationships with schools. The EWS is well organised and managed. Data on attendance is well used to target resources. The service is very effectively deployed to provide targeted support both to schools and to initiatives which encourage individual pupils to remain within the education system.

112. For the most part, schools surveyed were satisfied with the service and the visits showed that support for attendance was good in over half the primary schools and all but one of the secondary schools. The work of the EWS as part of the two social inclusion teams linked to two secondary schools with the lowest attendance was particularly highly valued and effective.

113. The LEA policy sets out clearly the role of schools in monitoring attendance and fully meets all its statutory and legal responsibilities, including robust use of legal powers where appropriate. The size and costs of the EWS compare favourably with other LEAs in the region. Given the range of its work and initiatives, and its increasing effectiveness in improving attendance, the service provides good value.

Behaviour Support

114. Gateshead provides effective support to schools and pupils in dealing with problems of behaviour. The rates of permanent exclusions have been below the national average between 1996/98. They dropped dramatically in 1999, reducing by 66 per cent in secondary schools and 30 per cent in primary schools. Approximately half the pupils permanently excluded in 1998 were re-integrated into schools. Numbers of fixed-term exclusions on the other hand, rose significantly between 1993/97. They reduced in 1997/98 and levelled off last year. Although numbers remain high, the LEA can rightly claim success for its policy of re-inclusion: the length of all fixed-term exclusions is now less than five days.

115. The LEA's strategy set out in its BSP and the EDP is clear and coherent. The BSP itself is a thorough and well thought out document. Its clear links to other policies and initiatives, and comprehensive integration of the work of all relevant teams into the overall strategy, are strengths. Targets have been set well and the range of support available is clearly defined.

116. Schools surveyed were generally satisfied with the LEA's support for improving behaviour. Support was at least satisfactory in all schools visited and was good in half the secondary schools and three-quarters of primary schools. The schools were generally very familiar with the LEA's provision and procedures for intervention and support. Most schools valued the work of the behaviour support service highly and a number acknowledged that provision has improved.

117. There has been some delay in implementing the new plans because of problems in recruiting a head for the proposed integrated behaviour support service. Additionally, the proposed guidance for schools on developing their own behaviour policies has yet to be produced. Nevertheless, the LEA meets all its statutory responsibilities and, given its success in supporting schools and effectively managing exclusions, the service provides good value.

Provision of Education Otherwise Than At School

118. There is a range of provision for education other than at school: through the LEA's two PRU, tuition at home and in hospitals, and through supported college and work related placements in Key Stage 4. The EDP and BSP provide good plans to improve support for excluded pupils and their families. Services generally work well together to provide or co-ordinate alternative educational provision.

119. One PRU offers full-time education for 25 permanently excluded Key Stage 4 pupils. The other provides full-time equivalent education for 21 pupils, though wherever possible pupils are maintained on schools' registers and PRU staff and other services provide in-school support to encourage re-integration.

One hundred and sixty-one pupils were receiving alternative provision other than permanent placement in PRU at the time of the inspection. Almost half were involved in alternative vocational or work-related courses for up to 18 hours a week to encourage re-attendance at school or re-engagement with education; many also receive additional home tuition. The remaining pupils receive home tuition. A significant proportion of this group are not excluded, but are persistent non-attenders whom the LEA is attempting to keep engaged in some form of education.

120. The LEA has effective procedures for referral to the PRU. A panel, representing education and social services, is responsible for allocating the provision and monitors the progress of pupils fortnightly. The LEA has been instrumental in reducing the turn-around time between exclusion and placement or alternative provision. The work of a recently appointed Exclusions Officer to monitor specific support for all pupils permanently excluded, and those excluded for over 15 days has begun to have some effect.

121. Nevertheless, there are problems. Six permanently excluded pupils receive only home tuition and the LEA's figures indicate that three-quarters of permanently excluded pupils receive less than 10 hours education per week. One-third of pupils receiving support from PRU staff have been receiving home tuition for more than a year. The LEA intends that by September 2001 all permanently excluded pupils will be receiving full-time equivalent education. Detailed plans to achieve this have yet to be produced but, rightly, the LEA is anticipating that the introduction of the Excellence in Cities initiative will provide the resources to achieve its target. There is still much to do. The associated monitoring of provision is unsatisfactory. Electronic databases effectively track pupils and their placements or alternative provision but do not record key information or actual hours of provision for individual pupils. The LEA is close to achieving a comprehensive database but does not yet have easily accessible data to monitor the extent of individual provision for all pupils who are not educated at school.

Health, Safety, Welfare, Child Protection

122. The LEA is taking reasonable steps to meet its statutory obligations and this aspect of its work provides sound value. The Health & Safety Executive conducted an inspection of Gateshead education service in late 1998. It did not find any urgent problems but made a number of recommendations, which the LEA has acted upon. A Health and Safety policy has been prepared and circulated to schools.

123. A designated senior officer is responsible for oversight of child protection and attends the multi-agency Area Child Protection Committee (ACPC). Links between education and social services in this area are sound. The LEA is playing an appropriate role in protecting children from significant harm and in

developing agreed procedures and staff training. Several schools visited reported good liaison and good support from social workers and caseworkers. Relationships with the police, the crime prevention team and newly formed Youth Offending Team are reported to be effective. Relationships with the Health Action Zone are also reported to be effective and there are proposals for a joint project team to provide a co-ordinated programme of advice and support to young people in the borough. An active drugs education programme is operating, providing good quality materials and support to schools.

124. The LEA maintains an up-to-date list of designated teachers. It is represented on the ACPC training sub-committee and is providing access to ACPC training for schools as well as an additional out-reach service, free of charge, to further disseminate training to schools. However, the LEA is not monitoring the attendance of schools sufficiently rigorously to ensure that all current designated teachers have received training.

Children in Public Care (Looked-after Children)

125. The Social Services and Education departments are beginning to collaborate effectively in providing for children in public care and have made a commitment to taking corporate responsibility for promoting the educational achievement as well as the pastoral support of the children in the Council's care. There is some effective practice. The survey showed schools satisfied with the LEA support. Several schools visited felt that the day-to-day support of social workers was effective and helpful. Nevertheless, the co-ordination of strategic planning and action between the services to meet the LEA's objective of raising the attainment of looked-after children (LAC) is unsatisfactory. Targets for raising their educational achievement have been set, but the EDP and other key plans do not provide a clear, staged, strategy for how these targets are to be achieved. A particular weakness is that those responsible for the education and welfare of these children do not have access to a common database of all the information that would allow close monitoring of attainment and progress against shared targets.

Ethnic Minority Children, including Travellers

126. The LEA provides support to improve the attainment of minority ethnic pupils (MEP) and Travellers through the Gateshead Bilingual and Traveller Education Service (BTES). Numbers of MEP in the LEA's schools are small, only around 1.5 per cent of the population, and culturally very diverse. The needs of these pupils, including Travellers, are effectively met by the service, but its work is not adequately reflected in the LEA's overall strategic planning for school improvement, particularly in the EDP.

127. The school survey showed schools satisfied with the support and those schools visited that had received BTES support had effective help. The service

has a good working knowledge of schools and the children they support. An extensive network of part-time specialist staff support bilingual teaching or provide interpretation skills, with good community links. The service provides induction and training for staff; a range of helpful curriculum materials; and clear guidelines to schools, including teaching approaches and registration and attendance procedures.

128. However, the extent of this work is not reflected in key LEA strategic planning. The EDP makes reference to raising attainment of pupils from minority ethnic groups but associated activities and actions are vague. The absence of an integrated LEA electronic database means that data on attainment of these pupils is not easily tracked and that related analysis of patterns of attendance or exclusions by MEP and Travellers is not yet easily available across services.

129. The LEA has clear policies on equal opportunities and combating racism. The Council has considered the implications of the Macpherson report on the Stephen Lawrence enquiry and the LEA is currently consulting with schools on its existing guidelines prior to revisions in the light of this report. Appropriate training for schools is programmed for the summer and autumn terms 2000.

Social Exclusion

130. The LEA is aware of the need to co-ordinate activities concerning support for disaffected young people, crime reduction, and community and lifelong learning. Its initiatives build on a strong history of extensive community education and continuing education in the borough. Though not yet completely cohesive, recent reorganisation of Council services and within education should ensure better co-ordinated support for continuing education and combating social exclusion across the borough.

131. The LEA has used SRB and other sources of grant funding effectively and, in many respects, creatively to provide multi-agency support for community regeneration projects aimed at tackling causes of social exclusion. Three major SRB schemes in different areas of the borough include community and education initiatives. The two multi-agency social inclusion teams specifically set up to tackle problems in difficult areas of the borough are proving effective and are beginning to link schools with community resources, including other SRB funded projects in the Teams and East Gateshead areas. The other SRB scheme in Bensham and Saltwell, includes a project to combat racism by raising cultural and religious awareness in schools and the community.

132. The LEA's key partners within the MBC and regionally, including the Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), report very positive links at both strategic and operational levels. Links with social services vary in their effectiveness. They are strong in the area of child protection, but strategic planning at senior levels still needs to be strengthened. An effective Education Business

Partnership makes an important contribution to schools in efforts to engage disaffected pupils. A number of worthwhile projects have been established, including Key Stage 4 mentoring. The LEA's use of work-related learning initiatives and college "taster" courses to help re-engage disaffected pupils has proved successful. The LEA's figures indicate that almost 90 per cent of pupils involved in these courses this year have registered for Post-16 education. The percentage of young people dropping out of education at 16 has also reduced from 20 per cent to 15 per cent.

133. The LEA's support for attendance and behaviour is effective and is contributing to significant reductions in permanent exclusions, improvements in attendance, and to the progress being made in re-integrating excluded pupils into mainstream schools. Although the LEA's formal monitoring of ethnic minority pupils has weaknesses, the support for these pupils is effective. Its provision for children educated outside of school does not ensure that all pupils receive sufficient educational provision. However, the LEA provides more than is required in ensuring long-term non-attenders have some continuing education. Its data does not yet ensure that comprehensive information on the most vulnerable children and those most at risk is easily available across all relevant services and agencies, but it has worked hard to address this problem and the systems should soon be in place. The picture is therefore mixed, but the strengths of the LEA's provision greatly outweigh its weaknesses. The LEA is tackling many aspects of social exclusion but it is not clear that there is overall direction and co-ordination of the various strands of the work and that the LEA has an overview of its effectiveness.

Recommendations:

In order to improve access to education:

- continue to remove surplus places as the school population declines;
- develop a strategic approach to school property management, involving schools in the planning;
- provide a common, comprehensive pupil-tracking database and use it to monitor pupils who are public care, educated otherwise than at school, and from ethnic minority groups;
- develop a specific strategy to meet the LEA's target for full-time equivalent education for all permanently excluded pupils;
- produce, in consultation with schools, the intended guidance for them to develop their own behaviour policies; and

- ensure that there is oversight and co-ordination of the LEA's promotion of social inclusion.

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

In order to improve the strategy for school improvement:

- provide schools with earlier information about their budgets each year in order to help them plan their spending, and provide them with forward budget projections so that they can plan further ahead; and
- improve the EDP by showing how the activity plans contribute to meeting SEN, how the activity plan for ICT is expected to improve pupils' attainment, and how the attainment of ethnic minority children and those in public care is to be raised.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

In order to make school improvement more effective:

- ensure that schools better understand the scope of the LEA's responsibility to challenge them in order to stimulate improvement;
- ensure consistency in the allocation of visits to schools and that the schools are clear about the purpose and cost basis of all visits;
- introduce more systematic evaluation of the work of SED;
- more specific guidance on ways in which performance data can be used in the management of school improvement should be provided and schools' understanding of the difference between a forecast and a target should be clarified;
- the monitoring criteria statements in the ICT development plan should be made more precise so that they can be used more effectively to assess the progress made;
- increase the support for schools to improve the quality of teaching and learning through ICT, providing alternative ways of managing the hardware aspects of NGfL provision;
- change the basis on which computer services and support are provided to schools, providing a clear service level agreement and delegating the funding for the services to schools.
- expand the training programme offered to individual GBs; and

- improve school managers' evaluation of the work of their schools so that it has a clearer focus on raising attainment.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

In order to improve strategic management:

- improve the evaluation of the LEA's work by further developing the system of performance management;
- ensure that schools receive good, prompt and cost effective building maintenance and grounds maintenance services; and
- ensure that future information for schools about traded services, including costs, is circulated well in advance of the start of the contract period.

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION

In order to improve support for SEN:

- planning for inclusion should specify how all pupils are to have their needs met;
- multi-agency working should be improved by implementing a strategic plan showing the arrangements for working together;
- plans to reduce out of borough placements and ensure increased levels of both borough and regional provision, particularly with regard to EBD provision should be implemented;
- there should be equitable funding across the types of provision for specific disabilities; and
- the delegation of funds to schools should be clarified and consistent, effective mechanisms for monitoring schools' expenditure and provision for SEN should be developed.

SECTION 5: ACCESS

In order to improve access to education:

- continue to remove surplus places as the school population declines;
- develop a strategic approach to school property management, involving schools in the planning;

- provide a common, comprehensive pupil-tracking database and use it to monitor pupils who are public care, educated otherwise than at school, and from ethnic minority groups;
- develop a specific strategy to meet the LEA's target for full-time equivalent education for all permanently excluded pupils;
- produce, in consultation with schools, the intended guidance for them to develop their own behaviour policies; and
- ensure that there is oversight and co-ordination of the LEA's promotion of social inclusion.

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