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## INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection was carried out by OFSTED in conjunction with the Audit Commission under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The inspection used the *Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities*, which focuses on the effectiveness of local education authority (LEA) work to support school improvement. The inspection also took account of the Local Government Act 1999, insofar as it relates to work undertaken by the LEA on Best Value.

2. The inspection was partly based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA, on school inspection information and audit reports, on documentation and discussions with LEA members, staff in the learning services directorate and in other Council departments and representatives of the LEA's partners. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on aspects of the LEA's work was circulated to all schools. The response rate was 66 per cent.

3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to 16 primary schools, six secondaries and three special schools. The visits tested the views of governors, headteachers and other staff on the key aspects of the LEA's strategy. The visits also considered whether the support that is provided by the LEA contributes, where appropriate, to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in the school, and provides value for money. Further evidence was considered from the inspection of the implementation of the literacy and numeracy strategies in another seven primary schools.

## COMMENTARY

4. Essex remains one of the largest LEAs in England, despite losing about 20 per cent of its schools to two new unitary authorities on local government reorganisation in 1998. It serves a population of 1.3 million, varying widely in almost all respects. Overall though, the level of advantage in the county is somewhat above average as are levels of attainment of pupils on intake to full-time education. Pupils' attainment at all stages up to GCSE are in line with averages in similar authorities and nationally. Given the context, this points to a measure of under-performance, but the authority has made immense strides in recent years in its school improvement strategy and there are positive signs of improvement in attainment.

5. During the 1990s a large proportion of schools, including three-quarters of secondary schools, opted for grant maintained status. This situation, and the subsequent need to re-create a single identity, presented the LEA with a series of challenges to which it responded well. In particular, it became more used than many to the market place for education services, explored and engaged in strategic partnerships with external service providers, and is now well placed to address Best Value issues.

6. The director provides a very strong lead and has worked hard, and with considerable success, to ensure that all schools, irrespective of status, move forward in partnership with the LEA towards shared goals of school improvement and, more recently, social inclusion. The importance attached to the constructive use, both by schools and the authority, of a range of performance data is a very distinctive feature of Essex LEA. Schools are strongly supported as autonomous institutions and the recent development of a detailed and shared framework for evaluation is testimony to this.

7. The LEA carries out the majority of its functions at least satisfactorily. It has particular strengths in the following:

- its Education Development Plan;
- monitoring, challenge, intervention and support to schools;
- leadership and strategic planning of school improvement services;
- expertise of staff;
- performance management of school improvement services;
- support to schools for the use of performance data;
- support for literacy;
- support for numeracy;
- the quality of leadership given by senior officers;
- the quality of advice given to elected members;
- the exercise of special educational needs (SEN) functions in a way that supports school improvement;
- support for early years education; and
- support from the personnel service.

8. The following functions are not being exercised satisfactorily:

- co-ordinated action to achieve collaboration in services for individual children between directorates and external agencies;
- support for children in public care;
- support for children from ethnic minorities; and
- measures to combat racism.

9. Corporate planning to achieve many of the Council's objectives is broadly satisfactory. Performance management systems are in place and strong. Although there is some planning across directorates, further development is needed to ensure greater cohesion of service delivery to individual children if the social inclusion objectives are to be achieved. It has been shown that this can work well in specifically funded projects and in the early years and childcare partnership, but all too often the day to day support from across services for those children who need it most falls down in practice.

10. Most schools support the learning services directorate's clear approach to social inclusion but some barriers have still to be broken down in those few schools where inclusion of pupils excluded from other schools is seen as incompatible with the school improvement agenda. The LEA made a late start in developing its support for the relatively small numbers of children from ethnic minorities and those in public care. While there is now the political will to raise the achievement of these groups, more work is needed in developing accurate performance data and using this to set challenging targets.

11. There are problems in the county, similar to those found elsewhere, with the recruitment and retention of teachers. The LEA has taken appropriate steps to tackle this issue, especially in relation to headteachers and newly qualified teachers, but this has resulted in only limited progress. These difficulties have inhibited the improvement of schools causing concern.

12. This is a strong and well-led LEA that has made significant improvements in the delivery of its services in the past three years. The most significant challenge ahead lies at the corporate level, where a fundamental review of planning is needed to assure the quality of service delivery when several services and external agencies are involved. The LEA is well placed to respond to the recommendations made in this report.

## **SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

### **Context**

13. Essex is a large county with a population of about 1.3 million living in urban, new town and rural locations. Its administrative boundaries were redrawn in April 1998 when Southend and Thurrock became unitary authorities. The county has considerable social diversity, including areas of severe disadvantage as well as affluence. Some 37.6 per cent of the population are in social classes one and two, which is higher than the figure for statistical neighbours (36.3 per cent) and for England as a whole (31 per cent). In contrast, the percentage with higher education qualifications, at 12 per cent, is lower than those for statistical neighbours (14.2 per cent) and England (13.5 per cent). Unemployment in 1999 was above the figure for the South East as a whole but below the national figure.

14. The school population is about 199,000. Pupils in Essex are generally more advantaged than is the case nationally. Entitlement to free school meals is 12.8 per cent in primary schools, compared with 20.5 per cent nationally, and 10.5 per cent for secondary schools, compared with 18.1 per cent nationally. The proportions of pupils with statements of Special Educational Needs (SEN) are 1.1 per cent in primary schools and 1.6 per cent in secondary schools, below the national figures of 2.6 and 3.9 per cent respectively. Data for 2000 indicate that 60 per cent of three and four year olds are on the roll of Essex maintained schools, close to the national figure of 61 per cent.

15. Just over three per cent of the population belong to minority ethnic groups, which is well below the national average. The proportion of children from ethnic minorities in schools is 3.2 per cent, compared with 11.7 per cent in the country as a whole. Just under 1.5 per cent of pupils have English as an additional language (EAL). The proportion of Traveller children is 0.4 per cent.

16. The authority maintains two nursery, 484 primary, 79 secondary and 22 special schools as well as five pupil referral units (PRUs). The county has one of the highest proportions of foundation schools in the country, with 58 primary, 50 secondary and one special school in this category. Provision for primary-aged pupils is organised in infant, junior and all-through schools. Secondary provision includes four single sex grammar schools as well as 11-16 and 11-18 comprehensives, most of which are coeducational.

17. Seven schools have been awarded Beacon status and 16 have specialist status: ten for technology, two for languages, three for sports and one for arts. Post 16 provision in the county includes two further education colleges, two sixth form colleges and four tertiary colleges, with a total of 14,000 full-time 16-19 students.

### **Performance**

18. The attainment of pupils on entry to full-time education is better than the national average. Pupils' performance throughout primary and secondary schools, up to and including A Level, is mainly in line with that of pupils nationally and in statistical neighbours. Pupils perform above average in Key Stage 3 mathematics tests. Essex schools improved their Key Stage 1 to 3 results between 1995 and 1999, at a similar rate to schools nationally and those in statistical neighbours.

19. At GCSE, the percentages of pupils achieving one A\*-G and five A\*-C are in line with the national and statistical neighbour averages. The average GCSE points score is above the national figure. Between 1994 and 1999, the percentage of Essex pupils attaining five or more higher grades at GCSE improved at a faster rate than schools nationally and those in statistical neighbours.

20. Inspection findings show that the percentage of Essex primary schools judged to be good or very good is below its statistical neighbours and the national average. The percentage of secondary schools in this category is also below the statistical neighbours but in line with the national average. Evidence from schools that have been inspected twice suggests that improvements have been made at the primary level with regard to the quality of education, school climate and management. In secondary schools, while improvements have been made in the quality of education, the proportion rated as good or very good for climate and management has fallen.

21. Rates of attendance and unauthorised absence are broadly in line with national figures. The rate of permanent exclusions is broadly in line with the national average in primary schools, but better than average in secondary schools.

## **Funding**

22. Essex received an education Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) per pupil for 2000/2001 that is close to the national average. Essex's primary and secondary SSA figures are £2,441 and £3,147 per pupil; the corresponding national ones are £2,473 and £3,175. This level of SSA allocation is high compared with other shire authorities' primary and secondary averages of £2,350 and £3,020 respectively. Expenditure on education is close to the national average and high for shire counties. This reflects the LEA's policy of spending close to the SSA over the last five years.

23. Overall spending on schools is at the national average. The 1999/2000 Local Schools Budget per pupil at £2809 was close to the national average but significantly above the average for shire LEAs. In 2000/2001, Essex delegated 84.4 per cent of the Local Schools Budget to schools, close to the national average of 84.2 per cent and to the 85 per cent target set by the Secretary of State for 2001/2002. The LEA has provided real term increases in its funding of primary schools; both primary and secondary sectors are now funded close to the national average. Delegated funding to special schools has been low at £8,309 per pupil, compared to county and national levels of £9,643 and £8,933 respectively.

24. The costs of individual LEA functions are broadly in line with national averages, although there are a few activities for which planned expenditure has been low. In particular, total planned expenditure on SEN in 1999/2000 was 13 per cent of the Local Schools Budget, which was significantly less than the national average. The costs of central administration and other strategic management are also significantly lower than national averages in 2000/2001. The cost of home-to-school transport is high, reflecting slightly more generous distance criteria than in many LEAs and the size and nature of the county. The remainder of the access budget is close to national levels. Capital expenditure in recent years has been consistently around £20 million, with approximately half coming from a combination of capital receipts and revenue.



25. The LEA's arrangements to secure grant funding have met with success, owing to a combination of the specialist knowledge of officers and expertise bought in as required. It has signed up to a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) to build a new secondary school and has secured credits worth £11.1 million. The LEA is progressing a Public Private Partnership Project to upgrade accommodation for 12 primary schools using LEA capital. The county has two Education Action Zones (EAZs) that attract combined funding of £1.9 million. In addition, four primary and five secondary schools are involved in the South East England Virtual EAZ with schools from another LEA. The Standards Fund grant to the LEA in 1999/2000 was £47 per pupil, above the shire average of £40 per pupil. The LEA also received £435,000 from the New Opportunities Fund.

### **Council structure**

26. The Council comprises 79 members. The Conservative and Independent Members lead the Council in coalition with a majority of one. From May 2000, the Council has piloted a cross-party executive board and five select committees, in line with the agenda for modernising local government. The executive board has eight portfolios, including those for education services and post 16/lifelong learning, the latter including libraries and heritage. The Conservative and Independent group holds all eight portfolios on the executive and chairs two of the five select committees, including the one for learning services. Each has up to 23 Councillors and has clear terms of reference.

27. All meetings of the main committees are public, reflecting the declared intention to be accountable and transparent. Standing committees oversee regulatory, semi-judicial functions and matters related to standards of conduct of members and officers that would not be appropriate for the executive board; they include the appeals committee and the standards committee.

28. The executive board has made a promising start. The pilot structure has accelerated Council decision-making, although there are concerns amongst members not on the board that they are insufficiently involved in this. The select committees are still finding their role, but this is fast developing, including elements of budget scrutiny and Best Value. The learning services select committee is also setting up sub-groups to explore specific issues, for example the structure of the school year. A major review on social inclusion is due to start in December. Select committees have the power to 'call in' executive board decisions, but have not yet done so; members are not yet confident with this when they have not been involved in the related executive board discussions. Communication between the chairs of committees and portfolio holders is still not fully developed.

### **The Education Development Plan**

29. The EDP is the main focus for the LEA's school improvement programme. Fifteen activities are grouped under four clear priority headings:

- |            |                                                                                                                 |
|------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Priority 1 | Raise levels of pupil achievement generally so that Essex moves from below average or average to above average; |
| Priority 2 | Recruit, retain and develop effective headteachers, teachers, governors and learning assistants;                |

Priority 3      Raise participation and achievement in socially disadvantaged localities and amongst specific groups;

Priority 4      Raise performance in under-achieving schools.

30. The plan is based on clearly identified needs, including a thorough analysis of school inspection reports. Activities are clearly defined and appropriately grouped under each priority. Each has its own clear operational plan. Success criteria are specific and make good use of inspection indicators. Priority 1 includes the implementation of the national literacy and numeracy strategies and raising attainment in ICT. There are explicit and appropriate links with other strategic plans.

31. There is appropriate emphasis on school self-review, reflecting a central aim of the school improvement functions of the LEA. More unusually, there is also a strong emphasis on school-based research, reflecting a developing tradition of encouraging headteachers and teachers to gather their own data from within school to inform aspects of their practice. This gives the plan an individual local flavour and is complemented by widespread references to the use and interpretation of performance data, including its use to track pupils' progress within and between key stages.

32. The targeting of support is clearly differentiated. Attention to underachieving groups in Priority 3 includes boys, the lowest 20 per cent and socially disadvantaged areas. The work of the EAZs also forms part of the plan. The LEA's role in facilitating networks is prominent, as is the dissemination of good practice. The LEA has a clear role in helping teachers to recognise characteristics of good practice in a range of areas and the introduction of the Essex quality framework (EQF) is a key factor in this development.

33. Statutory targets present a generally good level of challenge, based on attainment when the plan was first written in early 1999. The target for five or more higher GCSE grades, however, is too modest, given recent improvements. Progress against Key Stage 2 targets for literacy and numeracy has been good and these targets could usefully be revised in the light of these successes. Targets for children in public care are insufficiently challenging and not based on reliable data.

34. The implementation of the plan is well managed. The head of the advisory and inspection service (AIS) is responsible for the management and oversight of this and each activity and priority has a lead officer. The plan is regularly monitored at various levels and this results in clear evaluations with due emphasis on progress against success criteria. Formal interim reviews, reported to members, make good use of data to identify progress.

35. Implementation is progressing well. In particular, attainment in literacy and numeracy is on target and support for those schools in special measures and with serious weaknesses has greatly improved. Projects aimed at inclusion through a Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) grant in Harlow and two EAZs are also making good progress. Positive strategic measures to improve cross-directorate and multi-agency working are in place, but not always successful at the operational level. There has been much effective work on the recruitment of headteachers and newly qualified teachers, but the recruitment of teachers on the main scale suffers from problems similar to those

found elsewhere. There is good support for newly qualified teachers. The teachers and their schools are provided with helpful information. There are effective procedures in place for monitoring their progress and for further monitoring where this is needed.

36. Headteachers were well consulted about the contents of the plan at the draft stage and most felt that it addressed the right priorities for the county. In the primary schools visited there was a clear match between the priorities of the school and those in the EDP. This match was less clear at the secondary level, although schools had benefited from activities in the plan.

### **The allocation of resources to priorities**

37. The LEA's resources are appropriately targeted and changes have been based on the need to respond to varying demand and to maximise grant. The corporate budget planning process is sound. The LEA has been successful in keeping centrally retained expenditure low and broadly in line with its needs. Priority has been given to school budgets and the LEA has been successful in raising primary school budgets from a low base up to the national average and in doing so closing the gap with secondary school funding. The LEA has also completed recent reviews of its funding formula for primary, secondary and special sectors. It has made changes that reflect good quality consultation with schools and has targeted resources more closely to its needs and priorities.

38. Budgets in learning services have been generally well managed in recent years. In keeping with many other LEAs, however, mid-year budget transfers have been necessary for the provision of Special Educational Needs statements. This has happened for the past two years, with little adverse impact on the LEA's inclusion strategy. While the LEA estimates the need for additional provision, based on recent demographic trends, more detailed and accurate forecasting will be needed to ensure that its plans for inclusion are not compromised in the medium term.

39. The authority is well placed to support the planning and implementation of Best Value. An education management plan provides a directorate-wide overview and a clear set of priorities and targets, the progress of which is monitored on a monthly basis at education management team meetings. The LEA has a history of working with schools along the lines of Best Value principles and has worked well with them to develop a self-managing culture. All education services have been required to establish a set of common values. While these are embedded in service planning, they do not always imbue service practice, for example where officers deal directly with the general public. The learning services select committee has been charged with monitoring Best Value developments and this needs to move higher up its agenda.

40. The only Best Value review in year one of the plan is that of student and pupil financial support. A large number of reviews were planned for year two but this programme is likely to undergo substantial change in the light of possible developments in the reorganisation of children's services across the authority. Consideration of this re-structuring across directorates has had the effect of slowing down preparation for reviews. The LEA continues to be strong on consultation, competition and challenge. The lack of comparison data means that, as in many LEAs, there is some way to go on comparison, although Essex has joined a number of benchmarking clubs to take this forward.

## **Recommendation**

**In order to prepare services within the learning services directorate for Best Value reviews:**

- arrangements to monitor progress towards meeting Best Value requirements should be put securely in place.

## **SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

### **Monitoring, challenge, intervention, support**

41. The role of the advisory and inspection service (AIS) has been considerably developed over the past three years and is now part of a coherent school improvement strategy. The AIS carries out its functions of monitoring, challenge, intervention and support effectively. In particular, there has been a considerable recent improvement in the way the LEA intervenes in schools causing concern and identifies those likely to fall into this category. Given the high number of Essex schools that had been placed in special measures or declared as having serious weaknesses, this improvement was much needed.

42. The AIS is well managed at the strategic and operational levels. Its role is clearly defined. The use of time is carefully logged against priorities and the performance management of advisers is sharply focused on evidence, including school improvement data and the views of a sample of schools. Only those advisers felt to have the appropriate abilities undertake the role of school development adviser (SDA), linked to a group of schools. The publication, "Working Together for Every Learner", clearly sets out the principles, roles, patterns of activity and the way the LEA engages with schools, especially those causing concern.

43. The LEA is clear about its function in relation to schools as autonomous institutions. Its roles in terms of monitoring, support, challenge and, where necessary, intervention are clearly articulated. The provision and use of performance data have been central to the school improvement strategy and the SDAs have played an important part in reviewing schools' performance with headteachers and setting challenging targets. Considerable emphasis by the LEA on research and development projects in schools has supported a more reflective approach to the evaluation of practice.

44. The recently published Essex quality framework (EQF) complements the effective use of performance data. This enables judgements to be made against criteria and can be used by the school, by LEA staff, or by a combination of these. Its usefulness lies in the clarity of criteria, which enable schools to identify what they are aiming for. The EQF has formed an integral part of the LEA's training for school self-evaluation. A recent annex to the EQF provides an excellent basis for governing bodies to evaluate both their own effectiveness and that of the school.

45. School autonomy has been further encouraged through the facilitation of a wide range of consortia and cluster groups of schools. Examples range from small, well established clusters of primary schools, a group of ten recently appointed secondary headteachers exploring new ways of working, to groups of schools working together on specific initiatives. The details of these clusters are published, but do not give other headteachers sufficient detail about what expertise can be shared.

46. Leading teachers in literacy and mathematics have been well used and a similar approach is being developed in ICT. There is growing use of advanced skills teachers (ASTs). The LEA has organised a conference for them with follow-up surgery sessions, has compiled a directory of their expertise and plans to involve them in developing subject networks. The contribution of beacon and specialist schools to the

implementation of the EDP is under-developed but ways forward are under consideration.

47. There are clear programmes of school monitoring by SDAs. The LEA targets its resources well in inverse proportion to success, with effective differentiation in the level of SDA monitoring. In most of the schools visited, headteachers felt the level of monitoring had been appropriate. Primary headteachers found their contacts with the SDA to be very positive, with a judicious balance between challenge and support. Secondary headteachers generally saw less impact from their SDAs. Schools causing the LEA concern are placed in one of two bands. The SDAs play a significant role in co-ordinating a varied programme of support where this is needed. The LEA carries out a small number of school reviews where this is deemed necessary to move the school forward. These have a single focus and involve the headteacher in joint observations.

48. In spite of the clarity of the monitoring programme, some headteachers are unsure where the SDA monitoring role stops and support, for example under EDP categories, starts. There is some blurring of the distinction between these various roles and a lack of clarity amongst some headteachers of their entitlement in practice. Headteachers of schools causing concern are similarly unsure about how the level of intervention will be reduced once this becomes appropriate.

49. The LEA has ensured that schools are appropriately challenged through the target setting process. The use of data to support this has been very effective and a major thrust of the school improvement strategy. In Key Stages 1 and 2, SDAs engage headteachers in the detailed tracking of individual pupils' progress and make effective use of sub-levels of attainment to ensure that teacher expectations are set appropriately high and that all pupils are helped to progress as far as possible. Year 7 teachers in secondary schools have been challenged on the basis of agreement trialling with primary colleagues on pupils' levels of attainment in Year 6, so that appropriate expectations are set in Year 7.

### **Collection and analysis of data**

50. The LEA provides very effective support to schools on the use of performance data for the monitoring and raising of standards, focussing planning and as evidence for research-based school improvement initiatives. An efficient and effective system is in place for the collection and use of a wide range of performance and contextual data. Data for individual pupils are collected and their progress tracked over time. Data are stored conveniently on CD ROMs and returned to schools for analysis and interpretation. A useful summary document is provided in paper form for each school. The LEA has, however, been slow to collate and use data for minority ethnic groups and for pupils in public care.

51. There is clear guidance on the use of data and practical training courses for headteachers and other senior managers to help to develop confidence in their use. Good attention has also been given to the training of SDAs. Schools and SDAs make effective use of data to review standards and set targets for improvement. In secondary and primary schools, good use of data has made possible the identification of specific groups of pupils for targeted intervention. Data have been used successfully by the LEA to inform the priorities set in the EDP and an analysis of key data enables them to identify schools that may be a cause for concern.

52. Schools generally have well-developed systems for assessing pupils' attainment at all stages and for predicting targets. Baseline assessment on entry to school, non-statutory interim tests in Key Stage 2, end of key stage assessments and standardised tests are all well established. Target setting is fine-tuned with individual pupils' targets aggregated to give predictions for the cohort. SDAs challenge schools to set aspirational targets above predicted levels and closely monitor progress towards them. This targeted support for schools and pupils has made an important contribution to the recent improvements in attainment in literacy and numeracy.

### **Support for literacy**

53. The LEA's support for raising levels of pupil achievement in literacy is good. Key Stage 2 results over the past three years are broadly in line with the national average and rising in line with similar authorities. In 2000, the LEA's target of 73 per cent at Level 4 and above, was exceeded by three percentage points. Writing results increased by five percentage points, compared with the national increase of one per cent. Overall results for schools receiving intensive support are seven per cent higher than those for all Essex schools. Given the high quality of support and the continuing upward trend in results, the LEA's target of 84 per cent of pupils attaining Level 4 or above in English for 2002 is well within reach. At Key Stage 3, attainment is also in line with national figures, but the gap between the performance of girls and boys increases from 10 per cent at Key Stage 2, to 17 per cent by the end of Key Stage 3.

54. The National Literacy Strategy (NLS) is well managed. Literacy action plans are comprehensive and thorough, and good support is given to the inclusion of pupils with SEN and those with English as an additional language through training, publications and targeted cluster groups. National, as well as LEA data, is very well used to establish appropriate priorities and to target resources. The LEA has a strong focus on the use of research and the dissemination of best practice to inform continuous improvement. The NLS has been implemented alongside a range of innovative and well-targeted local activities including an Early Reading Research (ERR) project and The Essex Writing project. Both have resulted in positive gains for pupils and teachers; in particular, data from ERR indicate considerable success in accelerating the attainment of pupils and increasing confidence in the teaching of reading. Good use is made of leading teachers to trial developments, provide demonstration lessons, train staff and produce support materials.

55. The LEA has a well-targeted, appropriately differentiated and systematic strategy for supporting all schools. Intensive schools receive good support. Consultants' visits are well focused on curricular targets, and communication with SDAs is good. The LEA's professional development programme is very well targeted and offers good advice to schools on the implementation of the NLS; sound links are made with the school library service. Cluster meetings for literacy co-ordinators are effective and valued by schools.

56. SDAs effectively monitor and support the impact of the NLS in all schools through monitoring visits, lesson observations, and challenging target-setting meetings. There is a good system of joint monitoring with literacy consultants. A good literacy monitoring pack effectively supports school self-review.

57. Support for literacy at Key Stage 3 is considerable, well targeted, and has been very well received. The gap between the performance of girls and boys is being addressed well.

### **Support for numeracy**

58. The LEA provides strong support for the implementation of the National Numeracy Strategy (NNS), which is having a positive impact in schools. Schools receiving intensive support rate this as good; non-intensive schools are satisfied overall with their level of support.

59. Although Key Stage 2 results are broadly in line with national figures, the rate of improvement over the last three years has been above the national rate. Results in schools receiving intensive support improved by 12 per cent in 2000, compared with an LEA average increase of four per cent. The LEA exceeded its 2000 target of 69 per cent of pupils reaching Level 4 and above by four percentage points, and is well on course to achieve, or exceed, its target of 78 per cent for 2002.

60. The management of the NNS is good. The LEA's plan is clearly defined and national and local data are well used to establish priorities and to target resources effectively. Publications and guidance materials are of good quality and are well received by schools. Strong links have been forged with the literacy team, and there is considerable joint strategic planning and working, for example in developing the use of lesson plenaries. Good links exist with EAZs, and local initiatives are encouraged, for example the use of independent learning systems in numeracy. Leading mathematics teachers are used effectively for demonstration lessons and evaluations have been positive. Cluster meetings are highly valued by numeracy co-ordinators.

61. Schools in need of intensive support are accurately targeted using a range of indicators including low results and rate of progress, as well as taking account of schools causing concern to the LEA. Consultants are well managed, well deployed, and effective in targeting their work. In the schools visited that had received intensive support, consultants had a positive impact on teaching quality, on the management by coordinators, and on teachers' expectations. Of these schools, the majority showed a significant improvement in their Key Stage 2 results. Communication with SDAs is good.

62. Monitoring and evaluation are thorough and closely inform the LEA's professional development programme. Schools are well supported in self-review. SDAs are well trained for their monitoring role and an LEA-wide data collation system acts as an effective trigger for intervention. There is good joint monitoring with numeracy consultants.

63. Effective groundwork has been done at Key Stage 3, and a detailed audit by schools identifies key areas for action. Progression from Key Stages 2 to 3 is appropriately supported through the use of a Framework for Planning, bridging materials, and joint moderation of Year 6 and Year 7 work with teachers from primary schools.

### **Support for information and communication technology (ICT)**



64. Support for ICT in the curriculum has undergone considerable recent improvement from a weak position and is now satisfactory. There was previously insufficient curriculum focus because the small support team's priorities necessarily lay more in the standardisation, allocation and smooth running of resources. These weaknesses were reflected in the school survey. Recent developments include an increase in the size of the support team and clear plans to monitor the impact of ICT on teaching and learning. The identification and part-time secondment of 40 Leading ICT Teachers to implement training widens the support available in the county, enabling the LEA to work in partnership with two accredited training providers under the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) arrangement.

65. The LEA's ICT Strategy was published in August 2000, following the director's discussions with headteachers about recognised weaknesses. This is a sound document, although it would have been more timely had it appeared prior to the EDP and the National Grid for Learning (NGfL) strategy. It outlines broad resourcing intentions and pays more attention to developing teaching and learning approaches within schools than did previous documentation. It rightly identifies the need to disseminate effective classroom innovation and best practice using technology, Beacon and other schools.

66. Raising attainment in ICT is part of priority 1 of the EDP. An appropriate range of planned activity covers staff development, resources, infrastructure, teaching and learning, and materials. Success criteria are specific in relation to areas such as hardware provision in schools, access to email and the Internet and the provision of an LEA curriculum intranet, but too vague in terms of the use of ICT in classrooms and insufficiently related to attainment. There are effective links with the literacy and numeracy teams to provide joint courses and teacher materials, for example in supporting extended writing and boys' achievement in literacy.

67. The LEA's NGfL strategy is sound, despite the initial resourcing problems. A small group of schools has received intensive support and in those schools visited this had helped with curriculum planning and in raising teachers' confidence. Most primary and special schools have opted for a managed service provided by the LEA in conjunction with its main hardware supplier.

68. As in many LEAs, the lack of assessment data for ICT has hindered the authority's ability to measure progress in this area. The ICT strategy rightly identifies the need to develop a clear understanding of standards and progression within and across ICT in schools. It sets out systems to help schools meet their ICT improvement targets. Monitoring of the impact of NGfL has been a weakness to date, but the LEA has used centrally retained NGfL funding to employ a full time ICT curriculum adviser for monitoring and evaluation

69. Schools were provided with adequate guidance on writing their ICT development plans and primary headteachers were given additional support by their SDA. This has led to plans that are broadly satisfactory, although limited to one year at a time and lacking in detail, especially about intentions for curriculum development. Schools need further help to consider how they will make progress over a longer period, especially in clarifying the nature of the ICT curriculum they are aiming to achieve.

70. There is a wide-ranging and appropriate programme of in-service courses for

teachers in ICT. There are courses to teach basic skills and a considerable emphasis on the use of ICT in the curriculum, including support for the implementation of Curriculum 2000 and for teaching and learning using ICT, including NGfL. There are also courses to support schools in their own monitoring and evaluation of ICT standards. The LEA provided schools with effective help and information to enable them to choose NOF training providers.

### **Support for schools causing concern**

71. Support for the relatively large number of schools causing concern in the LEA is rightly a very high priority. The EDP priority is well targeted and outlines an extensive programme of appropriate support and intervention. Implementation is having a positive impact on standards, the quality of education and the quality of school management. During the last year there has been a significant improvement in the early identification of failing schools and in the support given to them.

72. Prior to this period, intervention in schools causing concern was inconsistent in its quality and impact. The LEA was not always aware of the depth of the problem in its schools and the quality and frequency of monitoring were sometimes inadequate. The co-ordination of specialist advice also varied.

73. Thirty-nine schools (seven per cent) have been judged to require special measures since 1993, five of them being so designated following OFSTED monitoring visit to schools with serious weaknesses. Twenty-seven schools (five per cent) have been identified as having serious weaknesses. Sixteen remain in special measures and 16 continue to be identified as having serious weaknesses.

74. The LEA has recently developed an effective system for identifying schools causing concern using well ordered key data and involving all school improvement services. The LEA collects further information about the schools and intervention is prioritised through a banding system. These schools were informed that they were on the LEA's register of schools causing concern and the band in which they had been placed. Although many had anticipated that they would be on the register, a significant number were included for valid reasons other than the pupils' attainment. Communication with this latter group of schools was too abrupt and insensitively handled. The LEA has begun to remedy this, and to re-build productive working relationships with these schools.

75. Notable amongst the recent improvements is the rapid intervention following OFSTED inspection. The SDA works with the headteacher and governing body to support school management and provide an effective channel for accessing other LEA support. Personnel services have played a significant role in tackling difficult staffing issues and the deployment of acting headteachers has had a positive effect. Curriculum development advisers (CDAs) and consultants have given good support for improving teaching and learning. Advisory headteachers and headteacher mentors have provided effective support for headteachers, particularly in monitoring teaching. The LEA's strategy for reducing the level of intervention when the school has improved is not clear to headteachers and governing bodies. This lack of a planned exit strategy by the LEA is unhelpful for schools who have had an extended period of intensive support.

76. There are early indications that these measures are having a positive effect in

reducing the time schools require special measures, and in accelerating the progress of schools with serious weaknesses. The LEA has set ambitious targets of having no school in special measures by 2003 and a reduction in the time taken to the removal of special measures to 19 months.

77. The recruitment and retention of teachers is an inhibiting factor to the improvement of schools causing concern. The LEA has taken appropriate steps to tackle this issue, but it remains a critical one for headteachers and governing bodies.

### **Support for governors**

78. Support for governors is satisfactory overall. There is a wide range of courses for governors and clerks, but governors interviewed found these to be of varied quality. There is effective induction for new governors and course evaluations are overwhelmingly positive, but governors in some schools visited were not well prepared for their governance role. Governors of schools causing concern have received effective support, particularly for action planning, staff selection and other personnel matters, and buildings. There has also been helpful support for governors of amalgamating schools.

79. Eighty six per cent of governing bodies subscribe to the LEA's governor support and a further 13 per cent use the service on 'a pay as you use' basis. Well over 90 per cent had a representative attending training this year. The service is responsive to requests for training in local areas for both schools and for local cluster groups. The LEA offers BTEC accredited courses, which have been taken up by 800 governors over the past three years.

80. Governors are generally well consulted over issues of access, admissions and school improvement. The Essex Governors' Association plays an active part in consultations and representatives are involved in operational groups. Governors generally find that LEA officers listen to their views and take their suggestions seriously. Governors were involved fully and made a significant input into the development of the Excellence in Governance annex to the Essex quality framework (EQF) and participated actively in the review of the EDP.

81. Governors receive helpful information via newsletters, which include a clear indication of where action is needed. Otherwise the flow of other information is insufficiently filtered. Occasional digests on particular issues are very helpful, but too infrequent and there is some duplication of information received from other sources. The Excellence in Governance publication provides governing bodies with highly relevant and well considered guidance for evaluating and further developing their work. While most governors found LEA officers helpful and responsive, some reported unacceptable delays, for example in responding to telephone messages.

### **Support for school management**

82. The LEA provides effective support for school management. Schools are encouraged to be autonomous and to access support from the LEA only when needed. Schools with identified difficulties receive intensive and well-directed support. All schools can buy into the comprehensive in-service training programme and the LEA provides useful guidance documents to support school improvement.

83. Schools can purchase additional days for support from SDAs. CDAs run useful courses and produce good quality guidance and curriculum materials for school purchase. Support from personnel services is very good and highly valued by schools, particularly in cases involving competency procedures.

84. The LEA has rightly identified from inspection reports the need to develop school leadership further. Training programmes for aspiring, new and serving headteachers provide valuable support for acquiring leadership and management skills, and headteachers new in post are well matched with a serving headteacher mentor. Headteachers and staff have been well prepared for performance management.

85. Leadership is also an important element in courses for middle managers. For example, heads of English, and literacy and numeracy co-ordinators in primary schools have become more confident in their leadership roles. The LEA provides effective support and guidance for the use of EQF for school self review and target setting, alongside a training programme in self evaluation based on the OFSTED Framework.

86. Courses to develop the quality of teaching are wide-ranging and well-targeted. There has been some evaluation of the impact of courses through the tracking of a sample of delegates and questionnaires to teachers coming into centres. There is scope for this important aspect of evaluation to be increased and a strategy for this has recently been established. In addition, SDAs monitor the impact of the staff development aspect of school improvement plans. There is an effective programme of courses for newly qualified teachers, providing continuity with initial training, further development of teaching skills and encouragement to prepare for future responsibilities in school. Teaching assistants and other school staff also benefit from the courses in the in-service programme.

### **Support for early years education**

87. Support for early years is a considerable strength. Council members have given a high priority to developing services for young children and have supported cross-directorate working between learning services and social services. Management and planning are excellent. The excellent early years and child care plan provides detailed projections of future places needed for three and four-year-old children, takes forward the principles of inclusion and integration of pupils with Special Educational Needs and sets appropriate targets.

88. Services are well coordinated and are very responsive to local needs. Social services and LEA managers work in an effective partnership with a number of external partners to provide a coherent early years and childcare service. Networks are firmly established between public and private providers, and these are used to share information and good practice.

89. Spending on under-fives is well above national average and this is consistent with the level of priority given to this area. The LEA has secured places for all four year-olds in a nursery setting for three terms before entry to school. Nurseries and pre-school playgroups are admitting increasingly more three year-olds and further places are being found to meet the demand from parents for five half day places rather than three. The children's information service is a useful key point of reference for parents seeking guidance on appropriate childcare places.

90. Training for early years teaching and support in early literacy and numeracy development for childminders are rightly given a high priority; many such courses are accredited. Baseline assessment is helpfully a feature of courses introduced to enable pupil tracking from an early age and as a basis for target-setting.

91. The monitoring and evaluation of early years settings are effective. Use of the EQF for self-review is encouraged. Early years development officers and community development officers are rightly deployed into early years settings that have been identified as a cause for concern.

## **Recommendations**

### **In order to improve the clarity of the SDAs' role:**

- schools should be given more detail about the boundaries between monitoring, support and intervention in practice and a clear indication of how each is financed.

### **In order to maximise the impact of the various school networks on school improvement:**

- more systematic information about the areas of expertise within clusters and consortia should be collated and disseminated to all schools.

### **In order to improve schools' planning for ICT:**

- guidance and support for schools' ICT development planning should be extended to give greater emphasis to intended improvements in the ICT curriculum and to the assessment of pupils' attainment.

### **In order to improve intervention in schools causing concern:**

- clearer guidelines for the reduction of intervention and support, when appropriate, should be drawn up, and planned reductions discussed with headteachers and governors.

## **SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT**

### **Corporate planning**

92. Corporate planning is satisfactory overall, but in need of further development in respect of cross-directorate and multi-agency working. Procedures for implementing and evaluating corporate plans are satisfactory, except in respect of these same cross-cutting issues.

93. There is a healthy dialogue between senior officers and members at the corporate level and in learning services. Executive board members are very committed in their role, give effective leadership and are well informed by senior officers. Senior members and officers share a vision of partnership working and this is evident in some planning and management functions. The 'Interact Group', for example, brings together senior officers from across services to develop coherence further.

94. The 'Essex Approach' sets out clearly the Council's purposes, policies and practice. This is a sound document in many respects, outlining key policy goals, and identifying key programmes, such as local action zones. However, it provides an insufficient steer regarding the development of crosscutting issues or the commissioning and monitoring of service quality across agencies. The education management plan (EMP) defines the full range of activities in learning services and is linked to corporate objectives. The EDP relates clearly to the EMP and service plans in turn clearly stem from these. Links between the different directorate service plans, however, are less clear.

95. The corporate management structure is developing in line with the recognised need to facilitate more effective cross-directorate working. For example, senior managers from across the directorates recently introduced corporate programme plans. These provide a more logical planning flow through corporate and service objectives to actions, and aim to monitor progress against these, drawing on measures of performance included in the Best Value Performance Plan. Although programme plans were produced after service plans in this, their first year, the approach has stimulated more cohesive planning.

96. There is little impact of this collaboration on day to day service delivery at senior officer level. Such links have not worked well in the past for the individual child and family, except where specific funded projects have provided a focus for better liaison. There is a need to address problems across the partnership, including staffing problems in the Health Authority and social services, which prevent the clear vision from becoming reality.

97. The Council is committed to tackling social and economic disadvantage and has identified the five localities of greatest disadvantage using a range of indicators. The LEA gave good support to the three schools-led EAZ bids in these areas and has subsequently played an effective role in the two that were successful and in the project funded by the SRB. There are good relationships and clear channels of communications between senior LEA officers and managers of the EAZs and the SRB project. The LEA achieves a good balance between its links with zone management and its responsibility for the schools within the zone.

98. New posts within learning services have been created specifically to address partnership working in general and its application to localities characterised by high levels of disadvantage. This shows strong commitment in learning services to working in such partnerships and needs to be matched elsewhere in the authority. The localities officer has been effective in promoting partnership working within the EAZs and as a link agent at a strategic level. The earliest EAZ took time to become established and lessons learnt from this experience informed more recent work. In contrast with the more general picture, the tackling of local problems through cross-directorate and multi-agency working is a strong feature of the work in the zones. Project teams drawn from schools in the EAZs have negotiated services with LEA officers, for example to support literacy, disaffection, and the use of ICT.

99. The leadership of the learning services directorate is strong, intelligent and well attuned to changes in national policies, local circumstances and emerging needs. The directorate has managed rapid change on a massive scale in recent years. In particular, it has handled the change in status of the large number of former grant maintained schools well. Senior officers, and the director in particular, have worked hard to re-establish a common identity and have largely succeeded in doing so. The service has learnt from the experience of having so many schools become Grant Maintained and now brings greater clarity to its approach to developing school autonomy and to the critical evaluation of its own services.

100. Consultation with schools is a strength, both in the director's area meetings with headteachers and through the formal trades union channels. Systems are sound and wide-ranging and reflect a desire to work in partnership. Schools rated aspects of consultation highly in the school survey.

101. Service planning is effective. The education management team retains an overview of activities informed by annual reviews of the various service plans, and with attention to performance indicators. Service plans are, in turn, evaluated partly against individual performance reviews. The education management team is thinking ahead in some detail about the future role of the LEA in its service provision. The LEA is already an approved function provider for work in other authorities and a successful bid has been made to central government, in partnership with private sector companies, for a radical change in the organisation of school improvement services.

## **Management services**

102. The Council's strategy for the delivery of management services to schools is broadly effective. Its approach has for some time been to delegate maximum funding to schools and to encourage school autonomy in the purchasing of support. Schools know the cost of services and are able to judge the value for money of traded services far better than in many LEAs. There is a strong focus on continual improvement of LEA services. Service reviews take place annually through a 'Services to Schools' board with headteacher and governor representation, although school involvement in reviews is too often restricted to an annual questionnaire. Consultation with representative headteachers on delegation and service agreements is strong. Client support overall is good. The Client Services Unit provides consultancy and advice to schools on a delegated basis. Corporate services to schools are broadly satisfactory.

103. Personnel support is of a high quality, a view shared by almost every school

surveyed. This highly responsive service is based on a thorough analysis of its core business and delivered by a group of well-trained individuals who are part of a cohesive unit. The service provides good model policies, advice and other support. The service collaborates effectively with the AIS to support the work on achieving the key EDP objectives. The service manages its large number of priorities effectively through tight monitoring of its business plan and individual objectives, and through its analysis of data on trends in service activities.

104. The service has responded appropriately to the difficult challenge of supporting schools with teacher vacancies. Intensive support is well targeted on schools with the greatest recruitment difficulties, though it has made limited progress to date. Support for the recruitment of headteachers and newly qualified teachers is satisfactory.

105. Financial advice and support to schools is of good quality. About 46 per cent of secondary schools and 90 per cent of primary schools buy into the service. Support for those schools purchasing the service on the planning and control of their budgets, and for schools at risk of a budget deficit, has improved with the 1999/2000 outturn statement showing just one primary and six secondary schools with deficits of greater than 2.5 per cent. The lateness of end of year budget statements for some schools restricts school financial planning.

106. The level of surplus balances in schools is too high. Over 40 per cent of schools had balances greater than 7.5 per cent last year. This is higher than for many LEAs and there has been too little effective scrutiny. As part of its challenge to these excessive balances, the service is using benchmarking data in a joint project with the AIS and Internal Audit, but it is too early to assess its impact.

107. There has been much progress in the LEA's support for administrative ICT in recent years and there are signs of continuing improvement. There is now a corporate strategy, based on sound principles and working towards a common infrastructure. There is a standard hardware and software specification for all schools to enable efficient information exchange between them and the LEA. All schools have been equipped to enable them to comply with these requirements. Plans are on target for the majority of schools to have fast access to the Internet and the LEA's Intranet by the end of this financial year. The LEA has also made good progress in the integration of key pupil data together with an appropriate search facility. Schools have had the option of using external ICT support since 1995 when the LEA outsourced its service. A recent major tendering exercise sought a strategic partner to provide ICT services and a managed service for schools, with a focus on reducing bureaucracy. As elsewhere, these positive developments have been slow to have an impact on schools' management and administration.

108. The LEA's property services are achieving a broadly satisfactory performance. Over the last year the service has successfully overseen the completion of condition surveys undertaken by external contractors and the completion of 60 per cent of suitability surveys. The work on the three PFI projects mentioned earlier in the report are also indicative of the LEA's progress in improving school accommodation in the county.

109. For the last six years, the LEA has fulfilled a client role with contractors for the capital building programme. Half of all schools have private arrangements with a single contractor for capital and other buildings works. Although the LEA has monitored the



contractor's performance and negotiated improvements in standards, schools remain frustrated by this, and the service was judged less than satisfactory in the school survey. The overall maintenance backlog is about £100 million, although a relatively modest £8 million of this is in the highest category of need. Maintenance problems have resulted in only two temporary school closures in the past year; this is very low for an authority of this size. There is, however, insufficient clarity about the likely waiting time for landlord repairs and maintenance and the basis for decisions about work commissioned by the LEA.

## **Recommendations**

### **In order to improve the planning of cross-directorate and multi-agency working:**

- corporate plans should set out expectations and principles for a more integrated approach to service delivery; and
- there should be more explicit links between the plans for different directorates.

### **In order to improve management support to schools:**

- new guidance should be issued to schools on reasonable and prudent contingency funding to ensure that fewer schools have significant surplus balances;
- reasons for surplus school balances and intended action to reduce these should be monitored more effectively, reported to the learning services select committee and the matter kept under regular review; and
- the basis for decisions about asset management should be clarified for schools, so that they are better able to establish the equity of decision making.

## **SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL PROVISION**

### **Strategy**

110. The LEA has a coherent policy and strategy for special educational needs (SEN) based on a comprehensive review and analysis of need and a thorough consultation process. Plans are documented well with extensive guidance for schools and parents. The recently formed Special Educational Needs and Psychology Service (SENaPS) offers combined services to ensure the effective co-ordination of the support from educational psychologists, specialist teachers and behaviour support staff. School staff are clear about whom to approach within the LEA for different aspects of support.

111. The development of socially inclusive practice in schools is a major feature of the LEA strategic plans for SEN. In particular, raising the achievement levels of the lowest performing 20 per cent of pupils and of pupils in disadvantaged areas are key priorities in the LEA's EDP. Social inclusion is also interpreted more widely in the LEA's aim to raise achievement for all pupils, reducing the incidence of failure and enabling schools to meet a broad range of individual needs. As part of the strategy to realise this aim, the LEA has secured funding to establish a successful Inclusive Schools Project which has enabled a group of schools to develop policy and practice to include pupils with more complex needs in the mainstream school community. The project is enabling strengthened contacts to be forged between different agencies but, overall, inter-agency links, especially with social services and the health authorities, are under-developed.

112. Increasing parents' confidence in the provision made for children with SEN is rightly seen as a crucial part of the strategy. There are well-defined opportunities for parents to have contact with LEA staff during the statutory assessment process. Parents are provided with a useful information pack and the LEA operates a parent partnership helpline where parents can seek further information. The number of cases requiring the intervention of the SEN tribunal is reducing. The LEA is responding in a measured way to establishing independent parental support and conciliation arrangements.

113. Delegated funding for children with SEN prior to stage 4 is consistent with the policy of providing resources for early remediation and prevention. The LEA also reduced its dependency on out-of-county placements and invested heavily in specialist provision to the extent that in 1999/2000 it was spending 35 per cent less than the national average on placements outside of the county.

114. It is the proportion of statements that makes the LEA stand out from other LEAs. In January 1999, Essex had 45 per cent fewer statements in the primary sector than nationally and 56 per cent fewer in secondary schools. This low level of statementing is unusual, but consistent with both national policy and the LEA's strategy of providing resources without the bureaucracy associated with statutory assessment. The inspection found no evidence of inappropriate avoidance of statementing for pupils on stage 3. Although funding for children with SEN at earlier stages of the Code of Practice has been below the shire average, overall delegated funding, for both primary and secondary sectors, is above the shire average. When this is taken into account, Essex is funding its schools appropriately for pupils both with and without statements.

115. Since publication of the SEN strategy in April 2000, the LEA has undertaken a

sophisticated analysis of potential patterns of inclusion, resource redistribution and the future role and organisation of its special schools. Its understanding of how to monitor outcomes relating to special educational provision is developing at a rapid pace and it is well placed to deliver not only its inclusion agenda, but also the requirements of Best Value.

### **Statutory obligations**

116. The LEA is taking effective steps to meet its statutory obligations. Good progress has been made to speed up the statementing process with 88.7 per cent of statements (81.1 per cent taking account of exceptions) being produced in the recommended period of 18 weeks.

117. There are clear guidance and criteria for the placement of pupils on the initial stages of the code of practice for SEN and thorough moderation procedures for pupils at stage 3. Judgements about statementing are based on careful examination of evidence and joint decision making. Schools welcome the recent involvement of headteachers in SEN panels for agreeing statutory assessments and see the move as a way of furthering openness and transparency about the criteria used and decisions made.

118. The quality of statements is good. Annual reviews and transitional reviews are conducted to time and the LEA is represented appropriately at the meetings. The LEA initiates the review by writing to the headteacher of the child's school, but does not send a copy of the letter to the child's parents. A small group of parents reported that they have, in the past, received insufficient information in advance of the review meeting.

### **School improvement and value for money**

119. The LEA exercises its functions in support of pupils with SEN with a clear focus on raising standards. OFSTED inspections show that the provision for pupils with SEN in schools is often better than that found nationally, especially in primary schools. SENaPS and the AIS provide a good range of support. For example, joint school reviews by educational psychologists and SDAs, using the EQF, have helped schools adopt a more focussed approach to improving SEN provision. There is good support for SEN co-ordinators. Concentrated effort has been placed on their training and development, and in developing the competencies needed by them to manage developments in schools. A good start has been made with the collection of data on the attainment of pupils with SEN and in monitoring the progress of specific groups of pupils in mainstream schools.

120. There is consistently good quality support and advice from the LEA's learning support staff who work in schools. The education psychology service also provides good support, although over a fifth of schools visited reported problems incurred through a lack of continuity of service. This reflects the difficulties faced by the LEA in recruiting and retaining suitably qualified staff. The assistant educational psychologist (AEP) scheme is a pioneering initiative, which was working well in most schools visited.

AEPs work closely with educational psychologists and are seen by schools as giving good practical advice based on recent experience. AEP support enables the time of educational psychologists in schools to be used profitably on whole-school development and more complex casework.



## **SECTION 5: ACCESS**

### **The supply of school places**

121. The management of school places is sound and improving. The LEA takes a strategic approach to the planning of school places, and has instigated reviews of primary and secondary school provision. There are appropriate links between school place planning, asset management and the school improvement agenda. The LEA also works effectively with other partners, including the dioceses of Chelmsford and Brentwood. The revised School Organisation Plan gives the LEA a sound basis to respond to future changes in demography, service family movement and new housing development. The class size plan is well constructed and also on course to deliver targets by September 2001. The LEA is well placed to respond to recommendations made by district audit in March 2000. These relate to the need to improve information sharing with all schools, support schools with short-term accommodation, and target schools with more than 25 per cent surplus places.

122. The LEA has taken purposeful and generally effective action to reduce surplus places in its schools. Currently, the overall surplus is five per cent in primary schools and nine per cent in secondary schools. Seven per cent of the LEA's primary schools and ten per cent of its secondary schools have in excess of 25 per cent of surplus places. The LEA is prepared to listen to the views of its communities, but takes decisive action where necessary. Lessons have been learnt from recent reviews and alternative strategies developed where these have become counter-productive. The LEA has been active in seeking contributions from property developers to finance additional school places and is using the PFI to build a new school in Loughton. It has also closed or amalgamated a range of schools, while two have been the subject of Fresh Start initiatives.

### **Admissions**

123. Essex is making good progress in developing and implementing effective admissions arrangements although it is not yet able to meet fully the wishes of all parents. Pupil admissions take place within a diverse and challenging context. The county has relatively large numbers of voluntary aided, voluntary controlled and Foundation schools. Of these, 191 are admissions authorities and 26 have selective admissions criteria.

124. The LEA's long-term aim is to have coordinated admissions arrangements with common application forms and timetables, and clear and simple admissions criteria for all its schools. It is having some success with this. The LEA now coordinates almost 95 per cent of secondary admissions with common application forms operating throughout each district. For the September 2001 secondary admissions process all but its four selective schools and three voluntary aided schools have agreed to have a common closing date. An Admissions Forum has been set up and is working on a common timetable for consultation on admissions for September 2002, and a review of the 'relevant area' to reduce the burden on admissions authorities of high numbers of applications. A pilot project has been initiated in Basildon to improve the coordination of mid-year admissions of secondary age pupils with challenging behaviour, with a view to extending this to other parts of the county.

125. Admissions booklets are clear, informative and easy to use. Ninety-four per cent of parents obtained their first choice of primary school and 92 per cent of secondary school. Admissions appeals have declined. The proportion upheld, however, has increased from 35 per cent to 44 per cent, reflecting the smaller volume and the higher proportion of parents with a strong case following the removal of an informal 'review' process.

126. Despite these successes there remain a number of obstacles to further progress. There is a wide range of admissions criteria across both primary and secondary sectors. A common timetable for all key admissions dates is not operating in either sector and the LEA does not coordinate primary admissions. There are inconsistencies in provision and in the exchange of information with schools. Parents do not have access to good quality information on their chances of achieving success at their first preference school. Some schools are not fulfilling adequately their statutory duty to advise parents about their right to appeal. The LEA has justified confidence in its ability to meet these challenges in the long term. Anticipated improvements will, however, take too long for some parents.

127. The LEA's expenditure on admissions and school places is at the national average, in spite of the complex context in which it operates. The LEA is unlikely to be in a position to accelerate the changes it wants in support of parents, without an increase in its capacity in this area.

### **Social inclusion and school improvement**

128. The LEA is actively engaged in developing socially inclusive practice. Appropriate attention is given within EDP priorities to raising the attainment, provision and support for vulnerable pupils. At the strategic level initiatives are well led and there is a high level of collaborative working between services for SEN, psychology, school improvement, pupil support and welfare. Plans are being implemented successfully.

129. The majority of schools visited support fully the priority given to promoting social inclusion within the EDP and other key plans. For about a quarter of these schools there are instances where LEA school-based work has been especially effective. For example, in one secondary school, a co-ordinated approach by school staff, the education welfare service (EWS), the integrated support service and SEN is having a marked effect in improving attendance and behaviour. Other agencies are also involved. As part of the strategy to improve attendance, school staff, the EWS and the police joined forces to undertake a successful truancy sweep. In a primary school a series of initiatives involving the school, EWS, health and child and family services has led to a marked improvement in parenting skills and parental attitudes which in turn is contributing to better attendance rates. The EAZs are increasingly successful in building up multi-agency early intervention strategies to counter behaviour problems and to combat disaffection.

130. Nevertheless there are significant challenges to be faced by the LEA, if it is to be successful in combating social exclusion and effective in raising attainment of specific groups. Despite undoubted pockets of success, effective multi-agency work has not been established across the county. The willingness of many headteachers to support inclusion, and in particular to reintegrate pupils permanently excluded from other schools, does not extend to all schools. The LEA is working hard in its partnership

with schools to make this happen

131. The LEA is working towards meeting Best Value requirements in relation to access. Considered as a whole, costs of access services are broadly in line with national averages. Strategic plans are clear and effectively communicated to schools. Schools are well consulted and report satisfaction with most services. Where they have raised issues and problems, as for example with behaviour support services, they have found the LEA to be listening and responsive. Those headteachers involved with the strategy group in looking at new ways forward talked favourably about the bid to DfEE to develop alternative models of service delivery.

### **Provision for pupils who have no school place**

132. The LEA discharges its duty to provide education other than at school well. There is a flexible range of provision that includes hospital teaching, home tuition and five PRUs. For those pupils for whom a return to full-time mainstream education is either inappropriate or unlikely, the LEA engages a good range of alternative providers. For example, in partnership with Anglia Polytechnic University, the LEA has embarked on an on-line learning system targeted at persistent truants and excluded pupils. There is also a productive partnership with the charity, INCLUDE, to provide education for disaffected Key Stage 4 pupils. There are clear phased plans for ensuring full-time education for permanently excluded pupils by September 2002. Currently no pupil receives less than ten hours of tuition.

133. The LEA has good procedures in place for registering and monitoring pupils who are educated by parents at home. Suitable checks are made on all home-educated pupils. Written reports on each child are detailed and outline the progress made in learning. There is timely negotiation for a return to school in cases where the child is making insufficient progress.

### **Support for improving attendance at school**

134. LEA support for attendance is sound overall and is particularly effective in those schools where most support is targeted. For the past three years, the overall levels of attendance in both primary and secondary schools have remained in line with national averages. Improving attendance is a priority in about a third of schools. The EWS has good links with other LEA teams and contributes appropriately to EDP priorities. Recently there have been notable improvements in the attendance rates of children in public care and Travellers.

135. Visits to schools by education welfare officers (EWOs) are made regularly with time allocated appropriately according to need. There is a clear statement of intent for working in partnership with schools, with procedures and responsibilities defined well. There is consistency in the way EWOs carry out their duties, which is having a positive effect. For example, the majority of schools now operate 'first day absence' follow up. Legal proceedings are used when necessary, with prosecutions fast tracked, if appropriate.

136. The EWS provides good guidance on developing a whole school approach to improving attendance. EWOs respond well to requests from schools for additional support in the form of attendance at parents' evenings or talks to pupils in assembly.

The success of such activities is dependent on the school adopting or being encouraged to adopt a strategic approach to the use of EWO time. Well-planned and targeted support from EWS had resulted in significant and sustained improvements in levels of attendance in a quarter of the schools visited, but a small number had received insufficient guidance to ensure that they made best use of the support available.

### **Support for improving behaviour**

137. Effective support is provided for the majority of behaviour problems faced by schools. The LEA strategy, as set out in the Behaviour Support Plan, is comprehensive and clear and has been subject to extensive consultation. Schools know how to access support. Recent changes to provision for behaviour support are welcomed by schools. In particular, most schools visited valued the outreach support from the PRUs and the work of the multidisciplinary support teams.

138. A wide range of strategies is used to improve the skills of staff in schools in managing behaviour. These include support in developing individual pupil programmes and providing training courses for midday supervisors. The strength of the support lies in the mainly prompt response and expert advice. For the past three years Essex has recognised and accredited through an award scheme those schools that have undertaken significant development to foster positive relationships and behaviour. A quarter of the mainstream schools visited had pupils requiring levels of support beyond the current range of strategies on offer. These are usually complex cases, often involving very disturbed youngsters needing the combined support of several agencies or highly specialist support. Support and guidance for these few pupils are often insufficiently prompt.

139. There has been a reduction in the number of permanent exclusions from both secondary and special schools. This has been achieved through well-targeted support for behaviour in those few secondary schools that account for half of all exclusions. The number of permanent exclusions in primary schools has remained static and broadly in line with the national average for the past three years. Again, a very small number of schools account for over a third of all permanent exclusions. The LEA is rightly concerned that, despite its clear systems and procedures, well over half of permanent exclusions in primary schools had not been referred to the behaviour support team at or before the time of exclusion.

140. Reintegration of permanently excluded pupils into mainstream education has had appropriate priority and there has been a significant decrease in the numbers of pupils receiving tuition for two terms or more. There are good levels of negotiation to enable swift and successful reintegration of pupils, especially those of primary age. At secondary level a few schools are reluctant to admit excluded pupils. As a last resort the LEA has occasionally had to direct schools to admit pupils as the only option available. Appropriate actions are being taken to strengthen partnerships and to improve reintegration rates. These include the appointment of additional staff to work with excluded pupils and the promotion of local reintegration panels.

141. All but one of the PRUs are able to offer schools access to off-site placements for a maximum of two terms for especially challenging Key Stage 3 pupils. Plans to address the gap in provision have been hampered by the failure to identify a site for the central PRU. This is a welcome option for most schools but understandably seen by



those without such an option as a distinct gap in provision. Although, with the support from the Standards Fund, eleven secondary schools are in the process of establishing learning support units, it is unclear if these will have a remit beyond the school in which they are placed.

### **Health, safety, welfare and child protection**

142. The LEA has clear policies on health and safety and schools receive comprehensive guidance materials on policies and procedures. Guidance and training for school staff in child protection is highly regarded. The LEA has appropriate checks in place to ensure that designated teachers receive regular training and updates. Although there are multi agency links through area child protection committees, it is a shortcoming that schools do not always receive consistent advice from different agencies about how to proceed with individual cases.

### **Support for children in public care**

143. The social services and learning services directorates have undertaken effective joint working in the past in relation to the pastoral support of children in public care, but are only just beginning to collaborate in better co-ordinated and strategic action to promote their educational achievement. There remain weaknesses in current arrangements. The local authority does not have complete or secure baseline data of the educational attainment of children in public care and this is a significant shortcoming. The targets that have been set for these children are insufficiently challenging and not based on reliable data.

144. A positive move has been to establish a multidisciplinary support team, to offer intensive support during the period when children in public care are being restored to full time mainstream schooling. About a third of children referred to the team have been successfully reinstated in mainstream school and are attending well; the progress of the remainder continues to be monitored.

### **Support for ethnic minority children (including Travellers)**

145. The LEA's support for pupils of ethnic minority heritage, including Travellers, has some strengths, but is inconsistent and so is unsatisfactory overall. Additional language support is well organised and welcomed by those schools that have used the service. The service also provides a good response to the increasing number of refugees and asylum seekers.

146. The LEA has a relatively low proportion of pupils from ethnic minorities (around three per cent). Until recently, support for these pupils has been given insufficient priority. In particular, the attainment of minority ethnic pupils has not been adequately monitored and this is a significant weakness. The LEA recognises these shortcomings and is taking appropriate action to widen the remit of the English as an additional language service to encompass all ethnic minority pupils. Steps are also being taken to secure the compilation of performance data and the provision of support for schools and pupils in liaison with the AIS.

147. The LEA's support for Travellers is good. It provides extensive guidance and information packs, training courses to raise the profile of cultural awareness, and

outreach support. There is a clear strategy for improvement with appropriate targets set to improve the attendance and attainment levels of Travellers and good systems and structures to monitor progress.

### **Support for gifted and talented children**

148. The LEA has recently put in place a well considered policy for the support of gifted and talented pupils. A small team of AIS personnel and associates with a wide range of expertise has been assembled to drive forward this initiative and a steering group includes several headteachers with a longstanding interest in this area. A good plan of action takes forward the EDP priorities. The draft guidance, currently out for consultation, is helpful in identifying and providing for able pupils in school. Performance data have been well used to identify gifted and talented pupils and there are plans to track their progress as they move through the school system.

149. A useful audit of current provision is being conducted with a view to identifying good practice that can be shared with other schools. Training has been provided and more is to follow for teachers and advisory staff. The team rightly plans to involve a wide range of support services and voluntary groups, including the early years partnership, governors development unit and the English as an additional language service.

### **Education against racism**

150. Measures to combat racism, although improving, are insufficiently developed. Having recently obtained member support and commitment to addressing this problem, the LEA is pressing forward to implement an action plan produced in response to the Macpherson report on the death of Stephen Lawrence. All actions and proposed measures within the plan are appropriately in line with the Inquiry's recommendations. Comprehensive guidance for dealing with harassment and racist incidents was circulated to schools in the mid-1990s. This contained suggested procedures and a request that schools report racist incidents. Few schools have done so despite many of those visited keeping their own detailed records.

### **Recommendations**

#### **In order to improve the service to parents through the management of admissions and school places:**

- the funding allocated to this function should be reviewed to ensure that plans for the coordination of admissions and reviews of school provision are not constrained by a lack of resources and can be implemented without delay.

#### **In order to improve support for pupil behaviour:**

- the guidance and promptness of response to schools needing urgent specialist support should be improved.

**In order to improve support for children in public care:**

- the completion of baseline data should be accelerated; and
- more challenging targets for attainment should be set, based on reliable data.

**In order to improve anti-racist strategies:**

- The procedures for monitoring and dealing with racist incidents in schools should be strengthened.

## **APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **In order to prepare services within the learning services directorate for Best Value reviews:**

- arrangements to monitor progress towards meeting Best Value requirements should be put securely in place.

### **In order to improve the clarity of the SDAs' role:**

- schools should be given more detail about the boundaries between monitoring, support and intervention in practice and a clear indication of how each is financed.

### **In order to maximise the impact of the various school networks on school improvement:**

- more systematic information about the areas of expertise within clusters and consortia should be collated and disseminated to all schools.

### **In order to improve schools' planning for ICT:**

- guidance and support for schools' ICT development planning should be extended to give greater emphasis to intended improvements in the ICT curriculum and to the assessment of pupils' attainment.

### **In order to improve intervention in schools causing concern:**

- clearer guidelines for the reduction of intervention and support, when appropriate, should be drawn up, and planned reductions discussed with headteachers and governors.

### **In order to improve the planning of cross-directorate and multi-agency working:**

- corporate plans should set out expectations and principles for a more integrated approach to service delivery; and
- there should be more explicit links between the plans for different directorates.

### **In order to improve management support to schools:**

- new guidance should be issued to schools on reasonable and prudent contingency funding to ensure that fewer schools have significant surplus balances;
- reasons for surplus school balances and intended action to reduce these should be monitored more effectively, reported to the learning services select committee and the matter kept under regular review; and

- the basis for decisions about asset management should be clarified for schools, so that they are better able to establish the equity of decision making.

**In order to improve the service to parents through the management of admissions and school places:**

- the funding allocated to this function should be reviewed to ensure that plans for the coordination of admissions and reviews of school provision are not constrained by a lack of resources and can be implemented without delay.

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