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LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

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APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection was carried out by OFSTED in conjunction with the Audit Commission under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The inspection used the *Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities (September 2000)*, 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 71 per cent.
3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to one nursery, 16 primary schools, five secondaries, one pupil referral unit (PRU) and two 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 eight primary schools.

COMMENTARY

4. Cumbria is a county of contrasts. It contains the sparsely populated Lake District, but on its geographical fringes are a number of urban areas, some predominately reliant on a single industry. Some indicators such as the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals suggest a slightly advantaged population; others paint a different picture with a significant number of wards characterised by severe social deprivation and high unemployment. It is the second largest county in England with a population just under half a million, of which one-fifth live in remote rural areas; the highest proportion of any English county. It has a high proportion of small schools.

5. Standards are rising in Cumbrian schools, but there are significant local variations. Attainment is better than the national average at Key Stage 2 and in line at other key stages. GCSE results and Key Stage 2 results have increased faster than nationally. Attendance rates are in line with national averages, but permanent exclusions are significantly below national rates.

6. Recent changes in the leadership of the council and chief executive posts mean that there is now the shared vision that has been lacking in the past; it complements well the resilience and strong leadership given by the director of education. The LEA has emerged from a difficult period and is providing sound support to schools.

7. The LEA has implemented national initiatives such as the literacy and numeracy strategies and the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs into mainstream schools effectively. This has been made possible by a good partnership with its primary and special schools. Relationships with secondary schools are sound overall, but have been more strained on occasions, for instance, when implementing national policies for behaviour. The LEA has been slow to formulate clear criteria for intervention and additional support for schools causing concern, which contributes to some misunderstanding in the schools.

8. LEA strategies for promoting social inclusion are working well. Support for behaviour, reducing exclusions, attendance and children in public care is good. There are weaknesses in the support for ethnic minority groups, including Travellers.

9. The LEA performs most of its functions at least satisfactorily and many well. Strengths clearly outweigh weaknesses. The following aspects of work are performed particularly effectively:

- support for numeracy and literacy in primary schools;
- support for improving attendance;
- support for schools in special measures and with serious weaknesses;
- support for financial management and personnel;
- Special Education Needs strategy and management.
- support for behaviour and reducing exclusions;
- leadership at senior level;
- support for governors;

- support for children in public care; and
- asset management planning.

10. The following functions are either not exercised adequately or, as in a number of recent initiatives, are leading to improvements, but they have not yet impacted on the schools:

- support for early years;
- performance management;
- implementation of corporate plans;
- removal of surplus places; and
- support for ethnic minorities.

11. The inclusion of education in corporate plans is relatively new in Cumbria. However, there has been very significant progress in the last year culminating in corporate and Best Value performance plans that are of sound quality. The framework for a performance management system has been established and is about to be implemented. The authority is now receiving strong leadership with education afforded a high priority and there is every indication that the corporate weaknesses listed above will be remedied in the near future.

12. Elected members are now providing a firm, positive lead for education, but they have not yet grasped the nettle to remove surplus places. It is a complex issue, as geographical constraints mean that the LEA needs to maintain small rural schools, and this it does well. The situation is worsening and stronger action will need to be taken if the LEA is to meet its own targets. The school organisation plan is weak with regard to the removal of surplus places, the future role of special schools and post-16 provision.

13. The council has opted for a lean strategic centre and some staff carry heavy workloads. Additionally, it has located many service providers outside the education department and recently outsourced a significant number to the private sector. Whilst individually these services provide at least sound support to schools, there are weaknesses in the co-ordination of service planning, marketing and review. Overall, the current arrangements contribute to increased workload at school level which has a particular impact on the headteachers of small schools.

14. The LEA has the capacity to improve and deal with issues raised by this report. This will require the implementation of corporate plans to provide an effective strategic framework, the continued commitment of elected members and officers working in close partnership with schools to secure continued improvement.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

15. The authority is the second largest county in England and is one of contrasts. Cumbria as a whole is one of the most sparsely populated areas in England. On the geographical fringes are a number of urban areas, sometimes predominantly reliant on a single industry. The average of ward scores equates to the 127th most deprived district out of 354 in England; some wards are characterised by severe social deprivation and high unemployment. The heart of the county contains the Lake District. This has pockets of affluence but is also characterised by very low population densities, rural isolation and, frequently, rural deprivation. Population is just under half-a-million, one-fifth of whom live in remote rural areas: the highest proportion of any English county.

16. The proportion of pupils in Cumbrian schools eligible for free school meals is just over three per cent below the national average in primary and secondary schools. The proportion of pupils from ethnic minority groups (0.7 per cent) is low.

17. The percentage of pupils with statements of special education needs (3.12 per cent) is just above the national average; of these the percentage attending special schools (15.3 per cent) is less than half the national average. The special schools provide for children with severe learning difficulties.

18. In January 2001 there were 349 maintained schools and three pupil referral units (PRU). The number of pupils were as follows:

LEA Maintained Schools	Number	Pupil Population
Nursery	7	583
Primary	295	43,867
Secondary	42	33,752
Special	5	420
PRU	3	155

These include 42 former grant-maintained schools. There is a mix of 11-16 and 11-18 secondary schools; one of these selects pupils on ability. Over 40 per cent of primary and secondary schools are church schools. Each September the LEA offers a place in a maintained reception class to all four-year-olds and a nursery place to all three-year olds.

19. There is wide variation in school size. In January 2001, pupil numbers ranged from 16 to 479 in primary and from 156 to 1730 in secondary. There is a high number of small schools. About one-third of primary schools have less than 90 pupils, one-third of secondary schools have less than 600 pupils in the 11-16 age range and half of the secondary school sixth forms have less than 150 pupils.

20. The percentage of 16-year-olds who remain in full-time education has increased from 62 per cent in 1997 to 70 per cent in 2000.

21. An Education Action Zone (EAZ) was set up in Barrow in 2000 and an Excellence in Cities (EiC) cluster is currently being established in West Cumbria.

Performance

22. In general terms, performance is in line with national averages except for Key Stage 2 where results are above them.

23. In 2000, the percentage of pupils gaining Level 4 or higher at the end of Key Stage 2 was approximately four per cent above the national average for English and mathematics. Improvement rates for 1998-2000 were above the national rate at Key Stage 2 and below at Key Stage 1.

24. In 2000, at GCSE level the percentage of pupils gaining five or more higher grades was 50.7 per cent compared to a national average of 49.2 per cent. There are considerable regional variations, reflecting the socio-economic position outlined above. For instance, in 1998 only 30 per cent achieved five or more higher grades in Workington compared to the LEA average of 44 per cent. In the period 1998-2000, GCSE results improved faster than nationally. Girls do better than boys at GCSE level in line with the national picture. However, the gap is very much more pronounced in West Cumbria.

25. OFSTED inspection shows that the percentage of Cumbria's primary and secondary schools graded very good and good is broadly in line with the national picture. However, the percentage of schools requiring much improvement is below the national average, significantly so in the primary sector.

26. Attendance rates in primary schools are in line with national rates generally; the 92.1 per cent attendance in secondary schools in 2000 was better than the national average. The percentage of unauthorised absences is significantly below the national average in both primary and secondary sectors. The rate of permanent exclusions in primary and secondary schools in 2000 was also significantly below the national average and in 1999-2000 declined more rapidly than nationally.

Funding

27. Education spending has been well above the Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) level for several years. However, the degree to which it was above that level declined significantly between 1997/8 and 2000/1. During the early part of that period cuts in real terms were made in overall spending on schools. Whilst these were concentrated on central budgets, the funding delegated to schools did suffer reductions. More recently, the allocation of new grant to the LEA for existing educational provision for three-year-olds has reduced net expenditure and hence the gap between spending and the SSA, although this is not the result of decreased overall expenditure. For 2001/2 the LEA has decided to raise education spending by more than the SSA increase. This reflects the higher priority now being given to education within the council's strategic priorities. The council's education capital spending in recent years has regularly included significant contributions from its revenue budget.

28. Arrangements for making bids for grant aid and co-ordinating submissions are satisfactory. There has been significant success in attracting funding to improve information and communication technology (ICT) provision and sports facilities for community use. Information and advice for individual schools on securing external funding other than the main government grant schemes are, however, limited.

Council Structure

29. From 1985-97 there was a hung council. The May '97 elections resulted in Labour gaining a small overall majority, with 43 Labour, 24 Conservative, 12 Liberal and 4 Independent elected members. The council moved rapidly to embrace the modernisation agenda and has piloted a cabinet structure, together with a scrutiny committee. It established an area committee system in 1992 and the neighbourhood forums fit smoothly into this pattern.

30. As nationally, some elected members and other partners have felt marginalised by the new structure: teachers' union representatives felt that it was rushed through without proper consultation. Some of these now sit on the education forum, which has a wide range of constituents including members, teachers, diocesan and parents' representatives. While this has been a useful 'sounding board' for the council it has too rarely made recommendations and is perceived by many of its members as inconsequential. The council is well aware of these issues and a 'modernisation group' is considering changes.

31. There is one scrutiny committee; part of its remit is to scrutinise educational policies and performance. It has demonstrated that it can be effective and is prepared to challenge on issues. For instance, it pursued the issue of GCSE performance with some rigour over a sequence of meetings with the director. The council rightly judges that scrutiny can be further strengthened. In particular, elected members are insufficiently involved in monitoring progress made by schools causing concern. While schools and members are well informed about progress with implementing the Education Development Plan (EDP), they take too little part in its evaluation.

The Education Development Plan

32. The EDP has strengths but also significant weaknesses. The strengths include the clarity with which national priorities are reflected. There has been an audit of school performance; this is sound in regard to overall performance, but weak in relation to acknowledged local issues such as regional differences. With the exception of attention to teaching mixed-age classes, there is not a clear chain of logic leading from audit to priority, to activity plans and to outcomes.

33. The LEA has oversimplified the presentation of the audit outcomes and in so doing has obscured the rationale for the inclusion of activities. For instance, the audit highlights unsatisfactory improvement rates at GCSE level prior to 1998, but does not make clear why small schools and boys are targeted in the EDP priority or how the acknowledged regional variations are being taken into account. The improvements in GCSE performance noted elsewhere however suggest that activities are the appropriate ones and that the strategy is working.

34. The EDP identifies clearly the actions to be taken, and nominates the persons responsible and the resources allocated to each activity. Many success criteria are too vague to enable progress to be measured. The priorities set for school improvement are, briefly: numeracy, literacy, pupils' performance at Key Stage 4, quality of teaching and learning, management and governance and inclusion. There is overlap between the teaching priority and other priorities. While there are good features, for instance support for the teaching of mixed-age classes, there is insufficient focus on promoting schools' own monitoring procedures.

35. Some activities focus on underachieving pupils, particularly boys, and others on underachieving departments or schools. There also are relevant strategies for supporting small schools. These include a well-targeted 'Raising Achievement Project' for small secondary schools. There is insufficient attention to ethnic minority issues.

36. The education strategic plan (ESP) includes the EDP as a core and gives brief outline actions related to lifelong learning and early years. With regard to the latter, there is no clearly articulated strategy.

37. In 2000, all the targets were met except for reducing unauthorised absence in secondary schools. The targets set for 2002 are challenging ones, and the LEA is on course to achieve them. The LEA monitors progress with the implementation of the EDP thoroughly. Senior managers evaluate the impact of activities in schools on an annual basis. This is more effectively done where precise success criteria were identified in the EDP. Each of the 43 individual activities has been reviewed and a written report made by the activity manager. There has been some slippage in five of the 43 activities. As a consequence of the review there have been well-considered modifications to the EDP.

38. These arrangements are generally effective, but although schools are well informed about progress, they have been insufficiently involved in the evaluation process. A significant finding from the 1999-2000 review was that full commitment to, and understanding of, the EDP have not been secured with all schools. The LEA has responded by raising the profile of the EDP in meetings with headteachers, and the school visits showed that the LEA is succeeding in this initiative. Additionally, the EDP is now a standing item on the agenda of the education forum.

The allocation of resources to priorities

39. Resource allocation processes are generally sound. Consultation on the education budget has improved significantly in recent years. The presentation of information by the LEA is good and dialogue with schools takes place at a formative stage of the budget making process. The council is at an early stage in developing a medium term financial plan, and so schools are not yet sufficiently confident to plan more than one year ahead.

40. Spending on education largely reflects council priorities. Recent changes have been modest because escalating expenditure on home to school transport has

limited the room for manoeuvre. Effective action has now been taken to address the situation and the education budget has been firmly under control for the last two years. A significant feature of the education budget has been the very high spending on under-fives relative to SSA. Aspects of capital expenditure on early years have been delegated to area committees, but without a clear strategic overview and this has led to the unsatisfactory position reported in Section 2 (School Improvement of this report).

41. Overall spending on both primary and secondary schools is significantly above the English counties average.

	Cumbria	English counties	All English LEAs
Primary Local Schools Budget LSB per pupil	£2,583	£2,324	£2,484
Secondary Local Schools Budget LSB per pupil	£3,046	£2,891	£3,141

42. Average delegated funding for Cumbria primary and secondary schools is similarly significantly above the English county average. However, the funding formula still essentially reflects the pattern of expenditure pre-local management of schools (LMS). Whilst resources for functions newly delegated in recent years are separately identified, the rationale for the distribution of most of the remaining funding is not made clear. At the very least, this limits the opportunity for informed debate. There has not been an overall review of the formula since its inception. The proportion of the budget distributed on the basis of age-weighted pupil numbers has increased recently and is unusually high. This self-evidently restricts the extent to which the LEA can allocate funds to meet the full and very diverse range of needs that its schools have. There remains a clear risk that the particular needs of some schools are not adequately catered for. These include funding for the protection of small primary schools, schools with significant numbers of surplus places, repairs and maintenance, under-fives and management support services.

43. The proportion of the LSB delegated to schools in 2000/1 is comparatively high (ISB 82.6 per cent of LSB) compared to the average for English counties (81.4 per cent) as is the proportion of Standards Fund grant devolved to schools. Schools are generally content with the range of responsibilities delegated. The centrally controlled budgets for statutory and regulatory duties and school improvement are significantly below the English county average, as are the budgets for a number of other strategic activities. Arrangements for charging the costs of central services to the education budget are satisfactory. Delegated funding for Cumbria primary and secondary schools is similarly significantly above the English county average.

44. A positive feature of the formula is the distribution of a major part of the funding for non-statemented special education needs (SEN) on the basis of pupil prior attainment measures. This system has been extended to the allocation of resources to support a significant proportion of children who would previously have had a statement of SEN. This enables funding to be allocated to provision, where it would otherwise have been spent on assessment.

Best Value

45. The LEA was late in establishing co-ordinating arrangements for Best Value and in developing guidance for the conduct of reviews. This put particular pressure on staff involved in the education reviews in Year 1. Much improved guidance and training are now being provided, building in large part on the experience of the early reviews. The external auditor has reviewed the preparation and publication of the Council's Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) and confirmed that statutory requirements have been met. The auditor's recommendations included addressing the resource requirements of reviews, and additional provision has been made in next year's budget. The involvement of members in the review process has been positive. Guidance on Best Value principles and responsibilities has been issued to schools, but this is couched in broad terms only and has not been developed into more practical advice. The LEA has decided, rightly, to alter the scope of reviews in the future towards looking at cross-cutting themes, rather than focusing on services as they are currently organised.

46. The choice of the education welfare service (EWS) for one of the two Best Value Reviews (BVR) to be undertaken in Year 1 was justified because of very high expenditure in Cumbria compared to other county councils and because pupil attendance and behaviour are high priority issues for the LEA. There were weaknesses in the design of the review regarding competition and challenge; for instance there was insufficient attention to possible alternative delivery models. The review identified strengths in support to schools in relation to exclusions and attendance. It also identified some weaknesses. The LEA has taken action to improve the procedures for re-integrating permanently excluded pupils and the collection and analysis of statistics. The EWS has clearly defined its role, but this has resulted in a reduction in support for behavioural issues. Secondary schools are concerned at losing this expertise while welcoming the Connexions initiatives in other respects. The review has led to improvements which are detailed in Section 5 of this report (Access).

47. The BVR for music had an initial presentation before the county council in February 2001. The music service was chosen as it had not been providing for secondary schools, and because it has struggled to cover its costs ever since its inception as a fully-traded service through a two-stage delegation in 1994/5 and 1995/6. This review was independently conducted and involved consultation with pupils and parents who use the service. However, schools visited during the inspection expressed little knowledge of the review. By examining the current provision in the context of the Government's drive to encourage music tuition, and by considering suppliers, and the likely costs, the BVR also challenged the LEA's provision of the service. The review recommended an option which will expand the provision of tuition to secondary school pupils and respond to parents' views about improving the service. Although it includes substantial additional money which has not yet been included in the budget, there are contingency plans which still make the recommended option viable. The report is likely to give rise to an improved service.

Recommendations:

In order to improve the strategy for school improvement:

- ensure that the revised education development plan for 2002:
 - makes clear the link between audit and activities;
 - makes the success criteria precise so that progress can be evaluated more efficiently;
 - cross-references to other related plans and initiatives; and
 - takes account of omissions identified above, for instance early years.

In order to improve the targeting of resources to need:

- put in place medium term financial planning, including for the Individual School's Budget;
- review the funding formula to ensure that it provides adequately and fairly for spending needs in schools and particularly for small primary schools, schools with significant numbers of surplus places, repairs and maintenance, under-fives and management support services; and
- implement plans to conduct cross-cutting Best Value reviews and strengthen the elements of competition and challenge.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Implications of other functions

48. The LEA was judged to give sufficient levels of support to 24 of the 25 schools visited; in 22 of the schools the LEA input had been effective in raising standards. The support is effective, and particularly so in primary schools. The inspection and advisory service provide good support for school improvement in schools where weaknesses have been identified. Details are given in the rest of this section. Amongst other services, management support services are at least sound; financial and personnel support are particularly strong. However, the fragmentation of management services and the 'lean' LEA centre results in schools having to carry out more administrative work and to co-ordinate inter-agency support. This has an adverse impact on headteachers, particularly in small schools.

49. Many of the elements for promoting social inclusion are in place. The strategies and services for SEN are in the main good. Support for behaviour and attendance and for children in public care is also good. However, support for ethnic minority groups and Traveller children has shortcomings; the LEA's limited resources have been over-stretched in dealing with recent significant increases in demand.

Monitoring, challenge, support, intervention

50. The LEA's approach to monitoring, challenge, intervention and support is satisfactory in practice. In some respects, it is very advanced in complying with national guidelines. Support is very differentiated, but the LEA has been slow to formalise its procedures and this aspect is unsatisfactory.

51. All primary schools receive three half-day visits per year from their link adviser. Secondary schools usually receive one visit only from a specialist adviser, which is for target-setting; in good schools this may be accomplished by a telephone conversation. The visits follow a set agenda, but schools value the opportunity to raise their own issues; schools causing concern receive additional visits. Hence, there is a differing pattern of support, but it is not yet fully in line with the principle of intervention in inverse proportion to success. The LEA is most effective in challenging unsatisfactory classroom practice and weak co-ordination of subjects. Challenge on matters relating to management and feedback to headteachers on their performance is not done consistently.

52. Extra support is deployed to identified needs and is effective generally, for example through the intensive support provided for weak schools and for literacy and numeracy. In one secondary school visited, the adviser provided extra help to a subject department identified as weak by an OFSTED inspection and this resulted in a ten per cent improvement in examination results.

53. The LEA has a small, competent advisory service and its resources have been targeted at areas of greatest need well. However, it has largely been reactive to problems and does not use the full range of data at its disposal, for instance, the school development plan, to define the needs of individual schools. There has

been insufficient consultation with schools to establish the rationale for the strategy and, as a result, some schools are uncertain of their entitlement and of the point at which the LEA would intervene in order to raise standards. The LEA is somewhat belatedly engaged in consultation with schools to define different categories of support and re-instate the link adviser role for secondary schools.

54. The work of the advisory service as a whole is well planned. Its priorities, as defined through the EDP, and its own development plan are chosen well. The reduction in its commitment to generating income from work outside of the county is increasing the amount of time it can devote to its core work of school improvement in the LEA. There is a good range of expertise, covering all subjects of the curriculum, but it is not always sufficient to meet the need. In this context, it is a weakness that there is no formal register of approved sources of external support.

55. The work of the advisers is systematically appraised and that which forms part of those EDP activities for which there are clear and quantifiable success criteria is assessed against performance indicators. More generally, evaluation is used to improve the service. For example, the current plan to re-institute the link adviser system in the secondary phase was formulated in response to the district audit report on the education service. There is, however, no formal system of performance management, and in its absence, no means of systematically assessing how the work of the service contributes to the LEA's overall aims.

56. The LEA actively encourages its schools to be autonomous and self-managing and all schools visited were soundly led. Support is good for primary schools and sound for secondary and special schools, while there are weaknesses in support for nursery schools. Advisory support was satisfactory or better in 18 of the 21 schools visited; it was good in 12 of these schools. The strengths of the inspection and advisory service considerably outweigh its weaknesses. It gives good value for money.

Collection and analysis of data

57. The LEA's provision of data to primary and secondary schools is good, valued by schools and improving. Guidance on the use of data to set targets is sound, but some schools, particularly small primary schools, need more help to identify the key messages from the very extensive set of data provided.

58. The data complement those provided by national sources. They are analysed by gender and socio-economic indicators. Although currently much of the data is anonymous, the LEA has consulted its schools and obtained agreement that schools can be identified in order to facilitate the sharing of good practice. The LEA is also improving the quality of value-added analyses. The planned introduction of a system capable of generating pupil-level information is scheduled for next year.

59. In secondary schools, the LEA funds standardised tests which provide useful additional information to underpin target-setting. In all schools, an inspector negotiates targets with schools armed with good information from the LEA. School visits reveal that there is challenge. Although the LEA has not been effective in persuading primary schools to set sufficiently high targets for literacy at Key Stage

2, it has attempted to tackle the issue. The education department has written letters expressing concern to the governors, identified schools with low targets and addressed the headteachers at a centrally organised meeting.

60. For pupils with SEN, although some mechanisms are in place, the LEA has not developed data systems to support the raising of achievement through challenging and measurable targets.

61. Data have been well used by the LEA to implement the priorities in the EDP; the LEA identifies under-achieving groups of pupils and subject departments in secondary schools. For instance, departments in ten schools were identified in 1999-2000. Each received some support but limited resources meant that it was not always sufficient to effect the necessary improvement.

62. The transfer of Key Stage 2 data between primary and secondary schools is unsatisfactory, and is mainly paper based.

Support for literacy

63. This aspect of the LEA's work is strong. Test results at the end of Key Stage 2 have risen consistently in line with the national improvement. In 2000, they were significantly above national averages. The 2000 result, 78.5 per cent, was above both the LEA's target, 77 per cent, and the schools' aggregated targets, which totalled only 73 per cent. School visits showed that the low targets in the schools were not due to lack of challenge on the part of the LEA or to the schools' inability to raise attainment, but that schools are being too cautious. At the end of Key Stage 3, test results have been similar to national results. In 2000 they were almost exactly the same, but they have not improved as fast as the national figures.

64. The National Literacy Strategy (NLS) is well managed. The officers responsible for the work have been successful in encouraging primary schools to adapt the detail of the strategy to meet local needs. Training has been of a high quality and there is very good guidance on the NLS in schools with mixed age classes. This guidance has been widely disseminated nationally, especially amongst LEAs which have, like Cumbria, large numbers of small schools. They have also used an action research project to identify and suggest means of remedying weaknesses in the teaching of writing and have devised a scheme of consultancy, audit and action planning to enable individual schools to improve their teaching. Schools visited are receiving support which is well matched to their needs and securing improvement in their results. Additionally, there is a good range of suitable courses available and sound support for literacy co-ordinators to meet regularly. Primary schools are receiving effective support for literacy. Support for the pupil referral unit (PRU) visited demonstrated the same strength as that for primary schools in that it showed the unit being helped to adapt the national strategy to its particular needs.

65. A systematic start has also been made in Key Stage 3, with an introductory conference and this year's pilot training. Support was satisfactory in all of the secondary schools visited but has, with its more recent start, yet to bring about the

progress achieved in primary schools. Nevertheless, some effective support has been given and awareness has been raised.

Support for numeracy

66. Support for numeracy is good in primary schools and this is reflected in pupils' attainment. The support for numeracy (and literacy) is not adapted sufficiently for special schools, however. In 2000 the percentage of pupils gaining Level 4 or higher was four per cent above the national average. This was six per cent above the LEA target, an indication that schools have been too cautious in setting targets. The LEA has responded by raising its target for 2002 and is well on course to achieve this target.

67. The National Numeracy Strategy (NNS) is managed well. Its implementation is monitored effectively by link advisers. There are four consultants and their work is highly valued by the schools; training is of high quality. Support for the teaching of mixed-age classes is particularly effective. Schemes of work, guidance and curriculum materials are available on the Internet, and a CD-ROM version can be adapted by the schools. The LEA support has been well targeted. Analysis by the LEA shows that, for the two-year period 1998-2000, improvement in the group of schools receiving intensive support was ten per cent higher than the LEA average. Networks for primary teachers have promoted the sharing of good practice. Summer schools have had a positive impact on pupils' transition from primary to secondary phases.

68. Support for secondary schools has more strengths than weaknesses. Pupils' attainment at Key Stage 3 is in line with national averages and the improvement from 1998-2000 is just above the national rate. The start made on implementing the numeracy strategy is good. The LEA uses data effectively to identify under-achieving departments in line with its EDP priority. The quality of subsequent intervention is good, but is not always sufficient to bring about the required improvements. The LEA is appointing Key Stage 3 consultants which will help to remedy this weakness. There is also insufficient support to establish an effective network of heads of department to facilitate the sharing of good practice.

69. The start made on implementing the numeracy strategy at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 is good and the training is of high quality.

Support for Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

70. The LEA has a sound strategy for ICT, has made good progress in the implementation of the National Grid for Learning (NGfL), and provided sound advice for training, but there are weaknesses in support for the quality of teaching.

71. The LEA attaches high priority to ICT as a medium for improving teaching and learning. Although its ratio of pupils to machines is lower than nationally in primary schools, it is above the ratio in secondary schools. In part, this is because the NGfL implementation strategy was front-loaded for primary schools, and end-loaded for secondaries. Much higher proportions than nationally of schools in both phases are networked and provide Internet access. The ICT development plan stresses the

priority the LEA attaches to ICT, partly in the context of the county's geography and the potential of the technology to improve communications. The LEA's analysis of OFSTED inspection reports also suggests that this part of schools' work has improved.

72. There is appropriate guidance available for New Opportunities Fund (NOF) training and visits to school confirm that this is valued. There are weaknesses in co-ordinating the provision of hardware via NGfL and follow-up training; more than two years in the case of one secondary school visited. There is a good range of relevant courses and these are valued by schools. A useful LEA website has been established. Curriculum materials are also available to schools through the Internet through good collaboration with Lancashire LEA.

73. The LEA conducts some monitoring and evaluation, but it is not comprehensive. Link advisers scrutinise ICT development plans in primary schools and use this information well to challenge schools. In secondary schools the LEA does not monitor sufficiently well pupils' standards in ICT.

74. The LEA has used Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) money to establish an innovative adult education programme, CREDITS. Some 60 primary schools have been equipped with centres to provide training in ICT for local adults, close to where they live and in a welcoming environment. The programme has been successful and brought benefits to most of the schools by providing pupils with extra access to computers. It has also equipped members of the community, frequently parents, with the skills they need to help pupils develop their own ICT competence in the classroom and to help with their own employability.

Support for schools causing concern

75. Support for schools in special measures and with serious weaknesses is good; for other schools designated by the LEA as causing concern strengths outweigh weaknesses.

76. Twelve schools in Cumbria have been judged to require special measures since 1993. Currently, one primary and one secondary school remain in special measures, which is below the national rate; schools make the required progress in the expected two years. There are currently seven schools with serious weaknesses. The LEA has designated nine schools as causing concern.

77. Some of the early action plans produced by schools were of poor quality, but the LEA has provided support and now the plans are a sound basis for improvement. The schools receive the support they need including advisory, financial, personnel and educational welfare support, if necessary. Co-ordination of the external agencies is usually done by the headteacher, which places an extra burden on small schools. Particular strengths of LEA support have been the effective use of seconded headteachers to provide advisory support and support for governors, including appointing additional governors where necessary. Financial delegation has been withdrawn from one school. A weakness in two schools has been the slow response by the LEA in dealing with management issues.

78. In at least three of the schools placed in special measures, the LEA had not previously alerted the governors to concerns. This was a few years ago and the situation now is much improved. The sharing of advisory reports is now well established in schools causing concern.

Support for governors

79. Support for governors is good and the governor support services (GSS) is highly regarded by the schools. The LEA has been successful in recruiting governors and nominating additional governors to support schools causing concern. Induction training is very good and provides new governors with relevant information and guidance.

80. Training is provided through central courses and is also tailored to individual schools' needs and to a whole governing body if required. Course evaluations are positive and the use of four main venues around the county helps to make the courses accessible. The LEA does not provide a clerking service, but provides training and briefing sessions for clerks and these are well regarded. There is currently a vacant post in the small GSS, and so it is stretched to maintain the range and quality of support described above.

81. Governors are well consulted by the LEA. An advisory group made up of representatives of key groups meets three times a year and governors are members of several LEA working groups on specific issues. The director holds briefing meetings with chairs around the county, although attendance is variable. Nevertheless, it is a large, dispersed county and some governors feel isolated and would welcome more opportunities for discussions with other governors and the LEA.

82. Information provided centrally by the LEA is timely and succinct, and a help-line is valued. Written reports of monitoring visits to schools by LEA officers are not routinely copied to chairs of governing bodies in all schools, and, in a few schools this has inhibited the governing body from carrying out its role effectively.

Support for school management

83. Support for school management is sound with good features. There is a coherent, well-integrated programme. Its main weakness is in the induction of new headteachers. The schools rated it as satisfactory in the survey, except for nursery schools.

84. The LEA's work to improve school management focuses on effective co-ordination of the national initiative on performance management, with local initiatives, schools' own self-review and the Investors in People (IiP). The IiP scheme supported by Enterprise Cumbria Ltd and managed and administered by the LEA has been taken up by a substantial number of schools. Currently, 18 have attained the standard and a further 40 are committed to doing so. In schools visited which are involved in the work, the scheme is having a strongly positive effect, and at best is enabling the schools' managers to improve classroom observation, teachers' performance and their own management. The work on school self-review

has been based on the OFSTED system, supplemented by the LEA's own guidance. While positive, its effect, particularly on classroom observation is less strong than that of IIP.

85. The LEA also makes good use of the national training schemes for serving and aspiring heads. However, its procedures for the induction of new heads are not secure. It has reached agreement with the primary and secondary headteacher associations that they will help new headteachers to acquire mentors, but there have been instances where this partnership had broken down.

86. The LEA's system of in-service courses provides effective support for school improvement. The local INSET network offers complementary locally based provision, which is often commissioned from teachers. This is particularly effective because of their responsiveness to the schools' developmental needs. At present the LEA does not evaluate the effectiveness of the courses in changing classroom practice, but it has plans to do so.

87. The support provided for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) is strong and has attracted national attention. It provides a central programme and operates a quality assurance system over the arrangements in the schools. The NQTs interviewed were appreciative of the support they had received, particularly the work of advisers during their school visits to observe the NQTs at work. The only weakness in this otherwise strong system is that it is not fully responsive to the needs of individuals. For example, very specific induction needs for special schools and courses sometimes repeat the content of initial training.

Support for gifted and talented pupils

88. The LEA has a longstanding commitment to supporting high achievement through the Cumbria able pupil project (CAPP). This was established in 1996 and later incorporated into the EDP. Additionally, there are arts initiatives under the auspices of Cumbria Arts in Education and there is a gifted and talented strand to the EiC project, the West Cumbria excellence cluster. A variety of activities have taken place, led by CAPP. These have included the production of a general statement of principles to govern the work, summer schools in some, but not all, areas of the county and the production of teaching materials. The LEA has requested schools to produce their own policies and provide useful guidance on their production.

89. The EDP sets a success criterion that 50 per cent of primary schools and 70 per cent of secondary schools should produce their policy and submit them to the LEA by February 2001. In fact, policies were returned by only 115 primary and 23 secondary schools and the target was not met. Schools visited were sympathetic to the aims of the work but many have higher priorities and so have yet to start work on producing the policies.

90. The LEA has a strong base, but has yet to produce the formal strategic statement of policy to co-ordinate the various activities, or to raise the profile of the work in schools so that they provide consistent support for gifted and talented pupils.

Support for small schools

91. Support for small schools is a strength of the LEA in most respects, but there are, nevertheless, some weaknesses.

92. About one-third of both the primary and secondary schools, and half of the secondary school sixth forms, are smaller than the level the Audit Commission suggests should trigger review of whether they are viable; about 13 per cent of the primaries have rolls below 50. The EDP outlines appropriate strategies for supporting particularly small primary and secondary schools, but there is no consideration of sixth form issues. An officer working group has recently been established to keep all issues relating to small schools under review.

93. Provision in very small primary schools is good. There are twelve schools with two or fewer full-time equivalent teachers. For the period 1998-2000, the standards in the end-of-Key Stage 2 tests were above the average for all LEA schools. All the most recent OFSTED reports state that the curriculum offered is broad and balanced. Two schools were subject to special measures, but they have improved very significantly and now provide a sound education for their pupils. Of the twelve, one is a Beacon school and three others have been nominated by the LEA for excellence awards. This is a very positive picture.

94. Funding for schools is discussed in Section 1 of this report (LEA Strategy for School Improvement); all the small schools visited were well resourced, but this was often achieved by substantial self-help. The LEA should investigate how well LEA funding meets the needs of small schools catering for pupils aged three to eleven.

95. The LEA has helped to set up and resource small schools' networks. These are well regarded by the headteachers and are useful for disseminating good practice and discussing issues. The attention given to mixed-age teaching on LEA organised training and curriculum materials for the NLS and NNS are particularly valued, and are accessible through the Intranet. However, there is no complementary scheme for science or other subjects or an authoritative list of guidance to other relevant materials.

96. Teaching headteachers carry heavy loads in the present climate. Administrative demands are particularly high and, although the LEA makes provision for one day's administration time through the Standards Fund, this is not the practice in all schools as a result of funding pressures. Many headteachers do not take up opportunities for consultation and several are absent from school with stress-related illness. The LEA is actively consulting with unions and with other LEAs to better develop its strategies. Nevertheless the inspection revealed that headteachers of small schools are too often required to co-ordinate the inter-agency support for pupils and the small schools' network is not used enough to lessen the demands for consultation.

Support for early years

97. There is no coherent strategy to the LEA's approach to early years. This, combined with poor communication between the LEA and agencies which provide for the early years, is adversely affecting relationships and has damaged morale. The school survey showed schools' negative view of the support in this area, particularly in nursery schools, where the support is rated lower than in any other LEAs surveyed.

98. The LEA has successfully worked with its partners to produce the early years and childcare development plan (EYDCP). The provision of resources has enabled all children to receive one year of part-time early years provision, either in nursery schools or classes, or in private or voluntary settings. All children are admitted full-time to reception classes, in the year after their fourth birthday. This has succeeded in increasing the numbers of three-year-olds in nursery education from 3,419 to 5,184.

99. The LEA has had some other successes. It has established three Sure Start schemes in economically disadvantaged areas and an Early Excellence 'Network', involving two of its nursery schools, a family centre and two childminder groups. In general, the quality of advisory support for early years is sound. One of the schools visited had also benefited substantially from advisory teacher support in improving the curriculum planning and classroom organisation of its reception year.

100. The problems lie at the strategic level. The distinctive roles of nursery schools have not been defined. Until recently, responsibility for some aspects of capital funding was delegated to the council's area committees, rather than planned for the county as a whole. The LEA was not able to establish a strategy, and the planning of places suffered with new nursery classes being established in areas already served by nursery schools. It is aware of the lack of strategy and has seconded a nursery school headteacher part-time to lead on the development of a county strategy for nursery schools although not for nursery classes. Meanwhile, proposals to change the basis of the funding of nursery schools have been circulated. The proposals will reduce the money available to many. In the absence of a strategic definition of their roles for the institutions and of a rationale for the proposed changes, a considerable degree of anxiety and hostility has been produced. The need to fill the strategic vacuum and to re-build relationships has become urgent.

Recommendations

In order to improve monitoring, support, challenge and intervention:

- as a matter of urgency, define clearly the expectations that the individual schools should have of the LEA's support and/or intervention, and use performance and other data held by the LEA to match support to the needs of individual schools;
- provide schools with a quality assured guide to sources of consultancy and training outside the education department.

In order to improve the effective use of data by schools:

- work with headteachers to tailor the provision of data to the needs of small schools, including guidance on the use of pupil level data;
- improve the transfer of data from Key Stage 2 to secondary schools; and
- strengthen procedures so that aggregate targets set by primary schools are in line with 2002 LEA targets.

In order to improve support for governors:

- ensure that all visits to schools by inspector/advisers are followed up promptly by a brief note of visit, which is shared with the chair of the governing body showing the list of identified action points, and noting any relevant leadership and management issues at the school.

In order to improve the support for small schools:

- reduce the administration workloads of teaching headteachers by:
 - issuing guidance to governors regarding minimum time allocated for this purpose through the Standards Fund;
 - ensuring that inter-agency work is co-ordinated more effectively;
 - making more effective use of the small schools' network for consultation;
 - working with union representatives and other partners to examine the causes for a significant number of absences, and devise strategies to address this issue; and
 - investigating the impact of LEA funding mechanisms in small schools with less than two full-time teachers and catering for three to eleven year olds.

In order to improve the support for early years:

- make clear the respective roles and the nature of the provision to be made by the nursery schools and classes.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate planning

101. There has been a significant improvement in corporate planning in the last year. The appointment of a new chief executive has added further momentum to initiatives. Previously, while education was funded above standard spending assessment (SSA), there was little reference to it in major plans and the education department was accorded a relatively low status within the council. In July 2000 the council initially approved a statement of purpose and seven key themes including, rightly, 'to increase educational standards and skill levels'.

102. The corporate strategy for 2001/2 and beyond was approved by the council in February 2001, along with the Best Value performance plan (BVPP). These plans are sound in relation to education. The LEA now has a secure strategic planning framework, but clearly it is too soon for there to have been any significant impact on other planning. At this stage, there is a shared vision and education is being afforded a high priority, but there is not yet coherence between all major plans. There has not been a coherent early years strategy and plans such as the education strategic plan have been constructed in a vacuum of central policy, and there will need to be some realignments. For instance, the target for staying on rates for 16-year olds is 65 per cent, which is six per cent below the 1999 figure given in the lifelong learning plan. The targets in the corporate plan are comprehensive and compatible with those in the educational development plan (EDP). Those that occur in the EDP are being monitored, but other targets are not yet being scrutinised rigorously; although the framework is now in place. However, a review of service plans is scheduled before April 2001, and the inspection team is confident that the LEA objectives will be achieved.

103. These weaknesses and anomalies in planning militate against effective corporate performance management. This is recognised and significant progress has been made in the last six months. The council has identified lead officers, consulted and agreed on policy, and a performance monitoring group has been established. Performance management in the education department has also been a weakness, and developments were stalled by the failure to appoint a successor to the deputy director. The director is now leading these developments.

104. The corporate plan recognises the need for regeneration. The decision to locate the single regeneration budget (SRB) funded initiative, CREDITS, in the primary schools has been to the advantage of the majority of schools involved in giving access to substantial computer resources and cementing community links. With this notable exception, education priorities have been peripheral in planning and making regeneration bids. Attitudes have changed and education is now well represented. For instance, educational standards are one of the objectives in the 'Regeneration Workington' SRB bid and the council is an active partner in the West Cumbria partnership.

105. The LEA has been pro-active in the last two years in addressing the regional variations in educational standards which are often associated with socio-economic factors. It took a key role in the recent establishment of an education action zone

(EAZ) in Barrow and regularly receives reports on progress; it is just in the process of establishing a cluster in West Cumbria area for excellence in cities (EiC) support. Although the EDP alludes to such factors, there is insufficient detail in the audit and little cross-referencing to indicate how the initiatives noted above link with other activities in the EDP.

106. An emerging issue for the council is its relationship with local strategic partnerships. Some LEA functions might potentially be delivered through such local partnerships and the expenditure of the resources allocated to the neighbourhood renewal schemes. Several million pounds are allocated to neighbourhood renewal schemes in Barrow and Allerdale; areas of eligible expenditure are regeneration, social services and education. In these early days the links with whole LEA initiatives are not clear.

107. The education department is well managed, but modestly staffed in relation to LEAs of a similar size and complexity. It gives good value for money, but some individuals carry very heavy workloads. Some of the activities in the education strategic plan (ESP) lost momentum when the deputy director was not replaced. The contraction in the advisory service several years ago means there are now no inspectors based in West Cumbria, which probably needs the most support.

108. During the period that the council was hung, there was a lack of political will to take difficult decisions, for instance, in removing surplus places. The policy to locate many of the LEA's key functions and service providers outside the education department created tension between the centre and that department, and a lack of meaningful consultation on such issues reportedly led to a lowering of morale. The climate has changed markedly within the last year. The new leader of the council has been instrumental in raising the profile of education; the cabinet member for education is well respected by schools and over a long period of time has promoted education's interests well. Senior members and officers now share a vision of partnership working and there is a healthy dialogue between them. Elected members are well informed by senior officers and decisions are taken in a timely way. The decision by the council to carry out at a public meeting consideration of budget issues, probably the most controversial issue with schools, is an indication of the will to be more open.

109. The partnership between the LEA and its schools has also been through a turbulent period. Disaffection with the LEA was a significant factor in one-third of secondary schools and one-tenth of primary schools opting for grant-maintained status. There are significant improvements, and the present picture is positive. Consultation and effective communications are necessarily challenging issues for the LEA given the size of the county, the dispersed locations of the communities and the difficult terrain. The LEA is meeting the challenge. There are regular meetings between the director and headteachers; those for primary headteachers are on a regional basis, which increases the workload of the director, but provides more opportunities for consultation. There are working groups, including ones focusing on local management of schools (LMS) and social inclusion policy. Since representatives are nominated by the headteacher associations, the system is dependent on effective communications within these organisations too.

110. Relationships with the police, health and social service departments and Diocesan authorities are good. The LEA has been unsuccessful in promoting education business partnerships in the past, but stronger partnerships are now being forged. The Cumbria learning partnership has been in existence for two years. It is chaired by the director of education and brings together a wide range of interests to ensure that the pathways to lifelong learning are co-ordinated across the county.

111. Overall, the picture on cross-cutting approaches is a very mixed one. The existing arrangements for strategic planning are not yet sufficiently secure to deliver co-ordinated government incorporating area committees and neighbourhood partnership schemes.

Management services

112. Management services themselves are at least satisfactory and some of the services are very good. However, aspects of support for schools in the **procurement of services** are unsatisfactory.

113. Some years ago the LEA established clear purchaser/provider splits in the organisation of its support services. One consequence was that a significant proportion of the services to schools were provided by a range of council departments other than education. Very recently, the further step was taken of selling a large number of provider units to a private sector company. There is no single document which provides information to schools on the range of traded services on offer, on entitlement to services to be provided from the LEA's central budget, or on schools' responsibilities should they decline to purchase a service from the LEA or the private company.

114. Such 'separate' approaches have caused some difficulties for schools and for the relationship between schools and the LEA. Requests to schools for information have been duplicated and the delegation of funding for many of the design and business services was followed by the issue of charging rates which diverged significantly for many schools from the sums delegated. Not surprisingly, this was, and continues to be, the source of significant dissatisfaction.

115. Only now is the LEA beginning to look at how it can ensure that schools have access to a full range of support services to meet their developing needs. This should have been done before now, and certainly in advance of a major outsourcing of services.

116. The LEA's strategy for **information management and administrative ICT support** is now developing satisfactorily. Existing support for schools' day to day ICT needs is satisfactory. Development work has largely focused so far on addressing ICT hardware and software needs and on establishing modern electronic communication links with schools. Given, in particular, the significant logistical difficulties presented by the geography of the county and the low levels of staffing available, this was understandable. It puts into question, however, the adequacy of the staffing resources allocated.

117. The quality of planning documentation, both for ICT support and information management, has suffered. Existing documents are of limited value for communication with schools and as a basis for performance review. More work also needs to be done on the LEA's strategy for information management if it is to meet all the national requirements. Arrangements for liaison with school representatives on the developing strategy are satisfactory and there have been presentations on ICT and information management to headteachers more generally. At school level, however, there is currently a sense of an LEA which has yet to bring a range of positive developments together in a clear and comprehensive way.

118. Schools' basic support needs for administrative ICT are being met. A full range of support services is offered to schools, and the great majority purchase at least some part of the service offered. Newsletters provide useful information and guidance. The great majority of schools can now communicate electronically with the LEA, and the quality of electronic links is about to be improved significantly. Whilst the LEA has yet to establish clear arrangements for managing some aspects of data collection and exchange with schools, existing ad hoc practices have generally worked.

119. Support for **financial management** is very good. The separation of roles between the education department and the external provider has been clearly thought through. The department provides a very good manual of advice for schools. Information and support for school budget planning and review are good. Staff are regarded as responsive and helpful. Useful indicative information on school delegated budgets is provided. Monitoring of school spending is appropriate. Intervention in the past was insufficiently rigorous, but has improved significantly over the last two years. The fact that a comparatively large proportion of schools have deficits is a legacy of the period before this. The number of such schools and the levels of deficit are steadily declining. Useful financial benchmarking data is provided. Accounting arrangements meet schools' basic needs. The great majority of schools purchase at least some support services. The payroll service works well.

120. Support for **personnel management** is very good. The great majority of schools purchase the services offered. There is no manual of guidance but the LEA has contracted with a private company to continue to provide all schools with a full range of model policies free of charge. The LEA seeks, and has always managed to secure, trades union agreement to the models issued and this adds to their value for schools. Casework support is reliable and robust, whilst maintaining due care for the interests of individuals.

121. Schools are generally well supported in fulfilling their **property management** responsibilities. A full range of client support services is offered. Take-up by schools is reasonably high, particularly by primary schools. Schools can also contract direct with the LEA for grounds maintenance and cleaning services. The take-up of the former is particularly high. There is no guidance manual for schools on property management but some useful written advice is issued, particularly on health and safety matters.

122. The provision of **school meals** is good.

123. **Home to school transport** provision is generally satisfactory and is good for special schools. A key issue has been sharply escalating expenditure. This was partly because of high levels of inflation and improvements in service specification and partly because of increasing numbers of pupils eligible as the result of implementing a 'safe routes' policy. The LEA has explored in depth the reasons for the increases in spending and the various delivery options available to it. Whilst some modest further increases in spending are forecast, the budget situation is now under control. The LEA has been active in liaising with service providers and a questionnaire survey of parents was undertaken last year.

Recommendations:

In order to improve the corporate working of the council:

- ensure that other major plans and service level plans are aligned with the corporate plan;
- implement procedures for evaluating the effectiveness of implementing the corporate plan; and
- ensure that the council performance management system is implemented in the education department.

In order to improve the quality of management services to schools:

- establish consultation arrangements with schools to ensure that a full range of support services is available to meet their developing needs; that the provision of information is full and timely; that consultation on service planning and review is appropriate and well co-ordinated; and that the development of formula funding takes proper account of procuring services; and
- produce a single strategic development plan for information management and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) support covering planned activities, timescales, resource implications, performance indicators and targets and circulate to all schools. Consider ways in which the process of procurement can be simplified for schools that wish it, for example unified ordering, billing and customer feedback arrangements.

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION

Strategy

124. There is a good strategy for SEN. The inclusion policy has been applied and developed over several years so that its implementation is further advanced than in most other LEAs. There has been a good level of consultation with all relevant partners; all schools visited were aware of this policy and approve it. Overall, analysis of need is used well to inform the development of provision, and is a strength of the LEA.

125. Strategic planning is outlined well in relevant sections of the EDP and is developed further through plans based on the programme of action and the recommendations of a recent district audit report. Policy documents are good, clearly state pupil entitlement, and identify the steps which need to be taken to develop inclusion further. The development and financial planning of resourced bases attached to mainstream schools are sound. There are plans, with appropriate targets and timescales, to provide further help and training to schools to support the inclusion policy. During the inspection considerable expertise and enthusiasm for specialist and inclusive education were observed, both in mainstream and special schools.

126. The current role of special schools is well defined, but there is no clearly stated view of their future role. There are only five and they cater for pupils with severe learning difficulties. However, they are near to capacity with numbers rising. This issue is being considered as part of the remit for a working group which has been convened by elected members.

Statutory obligations

127. The LEA takes good steps to fulfil its statutory duties. The LEA has clear criteria for initiating a statutory assessment, and these are communicated well to schools. The proportion of statements completed within the 18 week limit is 94 per cent, which is well above the national average. This falls to 70 per cent when all referrals are taken into account; the LEA takes appropriate action to identify and analyse the causes of the delays and brings these to the attention of the relevant agency. Statements of SEN provide an appropriate analysis of children's needs and a secure basis for effective individual education plans.

128. The LEA attempts to meet parental wishes wherever possible, and goes to considerable lengths to do so, for instance, undertaking in-depth research on the feasibility of establishing low incidence SEN provision. A small minority of parents feel that their children's needs are not being met, but the number of appeals registered with the SEN tribunal in 1999-2000 was in line with the average for all LEAs, as were the numbers withdrawn or resolved before hearing.

129. Parent partnership arrangements are in place and working effectively. Provision of independent parent support varies from good in some areas to unsatisfactory in others. The LEA is addressing this inconsistency by mounting a

training programme; training for people to work in SEN conflict resolution has also been arranged.

Improvement and value for money

130. Support services are of a high quality, are managed well, and ensure efficiency and value for money. There is good support for children's learning needs and for children with visual and/or hearing impairment. The quality of support provided by the education psychology service is good, although a minority of schools consider it is insufficient. Speech therapy is not always available at the time and in the quantity required.

131. The challenges of supporting the inclusion policy and the increasing demands for involvement in national initiatives place considerable pressures on the service's capacity to deliver. The SEN adviser provides high quality support but the time allocation is insufficient; consequently schools report that sometimes there are difficulties in accessing specialist advice. Good quality training for Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) and sound support for the SENCO network only partly compensate for this.

132. The LEA has compiled a wealth of information about the pattern of needs across the county. It has a longstanding culture of review, research and continuous improvement. It uses a good range of mechanisms to audit its strengths and weaknesses based on internal service evaluation, and independent external evaluations.

133. Budgeting control in relation to SEN is very strong. The planning and use of SEN budgets are monitored well with clear analysis and annual reporting arrangements. A culture of accountability and rigour has been firmly established. Support for non-statutory SEN is arranged through a clear system of delegated funding, soundly based on educational assessment with appropriate protocols. This contributes well to the ability of schools to support SEN flexibility and also contributes to overall school improvement. The LEA has appropriate Best Value indicators, and is developing the effective use of performance management data to develop its efficiency further. Costs compare favourably with those in similar LEAs and value for money is good.

Recommendation

In order to improve the provision for special educational needs:

- improve the availability of SEN specialist advice and training for non-specialist link advisers for schools.

SECTION 5: ACCESS

The supply of school places

134. The LEA's overall performance in this area is unsatisfactory. The planning processes are both thorough and technically sound, but the action taken has not succeeded in reducing the comparatively high proportion of surplus places in schools. In the primary sector, the position is worsening as rolls steadily fall. The problem in the secondary sector is less severe, at least in the short term, as rolls are forecast to rise. In due course, however, the lower primary rolls will feed through and cause difficulties in the secondary phase. A significant minority of both primary and secondary schools currently have over 25 per cent surplus places. Not all of these are schools in rural settings where closure would cause particular difficulties.

135. Forecasting pupil numbers has been largely accurate and has improved recently. Liaison with schools and other relevant agencies is satisfactory. The LEA's school organisation plan was produced on time after full consultation. The first annual revision was also completed to the required timetable. It provides a clear assessment of projected need for primary and secondary provision in each local area. However, it lacks clear and reasonably precise proposals for action and so fails to provide an adequate focus for debate.

136. The LEA has taken some significant action in recent years to reduce surplus places. There have been a number of amalgamations of infant and junior schools, amendments to school standard numbers, transfers of elements of school accommodation to other uses (particularly under fives and community education provision) and capital schemes designed to remove places. At this level the LEA has performed well, particularly given the comparatively very low level of expenditure on staff fulfilling the combined school planning and admissions function. However, only the closure of a significant number of schools will now suffice to deliver its targets for reducing surplus places. The number of such closures in recent years has been very low. Partly this is because elected members have not been prepared to grasp the nettle and partly it is because proposals to close schools are passionately opposed. There have been a number of acrimonious public debates.

137. The LEA has attempted to reduce the drain on resources arising from schools with surplus places by increasing the proportion of funding, delegated on the basis of age weighted pupil numbers. Thus nursery classes are funded in accordance with current roll rather than a set number of places, and much of the allocation for school premises costs now depends on roll rather than building size. A proper balance is necessary between rationalising the provision of school places and funding schools properly whilst they remain open.

138. The school organisation plan is weak in its coverage of SEN. There has been a significant increase in special school rolls in the LEA in recent years, and it is clear that if this trend continues such provision will need to be increased substantially. If the LEA has plans to expand provision or, alternatively to adopt strategies which will make such expansion unnecessary, the school organisation plan does not explain

them in any useful detail. The plan is similarly limited in its coverage of post-16 provision.

Admissions

139. Admissions arrangements for both primary and secondary schools are sound. Co-operation with voluntary aided and foundation schools is good. The LEA has taken some useful action to seek feedback from parents through a questionnaire survey. Although the provision of information and advice to parents works satisfactorily, there are some shortcomings in the admissions brochure. Identified improvements to the information for parents have not been made, partly because of the limited staffing available. As secondary school rolls rise and surplus places in that sector reduce in the short term, it is likely both that the LEA's administrative workload will increase and that parents will demand better information during the transfer process.

140. Admissions criteria are reasonable and the planned timetables for admission to the main entry years are appropriate. Arrangements for the transfer to mainstream secondary schools of children with SEN statements are satisfactory. The number of appeals is comparatively low, partly because of the large number of surplus places in schools.

Asset management

141. The LEA's asset management planning is good. Deadlines for submitting both policy statements and data on the condition and suitability of school buildings have all been met. The arrangements established for consultation with schools on all aspects of asset management planning are good. Condition and suitability surveys have been carried out effectively in close collaboration with schools. All this has been achieved despite significantly lower expenditure on the planning and assessment processes than is found in most other LEAs.

142. The condition survey reports do not clearly specify the works required or include a division of funding responsibilities between school and LEA. Without the former, it is difficult for schools to commission the necessary works. Without the latter, it is difficult for them to estimate with any precision what their budgetary provision should be. These limitations will be mitigated to a degree by a new programme of annual meetings at each school to discuss progress and future priorities.

143. The LEA has used the condition survey information well to establish that both centrally controlled and delegated funding are sufficient. Whilst the LEA's capital spending on school buildings in recent years has been below the English counties average, the great majority of this spending has been on the improvement, replacement, and repair of existing stock. The LEA has fulfilled its overall responsibilities in such respects satisfactorily, with recent investment in the secondary sector being good. Appropriate arrangements are made to ensure that value for money is received. The management of major building projects is generally good.

Provision of education otherwise than at school

144. Support for pupils out of school is sound with some areas of strength. The range of provision meets most, but not yet all, pupils' needs.

145. Pupils who are excluded from school are well provided for at the three Pupil referral units (PRUs). Younger pupils are dually registered at school and the PRU and receive full-time education. This has not been achieved for older pupils, but plans are in place to provide full-time provision for all by 2002. Currently, at Key Stage 4 over half the pupils are offered between ten and 20 hours, and a further quarter receive between 20 and 25 hours tuition. The remainder, including newly excluded pupils and unplaced arrivals from other LEAs, receive up to 10 hours tuition. Pupils in Years ten and 11 are offered opportunities to gain accredited qualification through part-time attendance at local colleges.

146. The number of pupils requiring education otherwise than at school is reducing, but is still too high; rates of re-integration for permanently excluded pupils have been low. The LEA is addressing these difficulties and has strengthened procedures. Plans for re-integration panels to help excluded pupils return to mainstream education are well advanced, and re-integration officers have now been appointed.

147. There is good provision for pregnant schoolgirls and for pupils who are at home ill. A home tuition policy usefully details the process for accessing support, the roles of the multi-agency workers involved, and guidance for parents, schools and medical practitioners. The LEA has sound procedures in place for inspecting the education provided for pupils whose parents choose to educate them at home. It also provides useful guidance to parents. The provision is sound value for money.

Attendance

148. LEA support for attendance is very good and is particularly effective in those schools where most support is targeted. Attendance rates are generally in line with national averages, but there were significant improvements in both the primary and secondary sectors in 1999-2000. The percentage of unauthorised absences is significantly below the national figure.

149. The service uses a wide range of measures to improve attendance, including register checks, first day absence follow-up, analysis of trends, awareness raising with pupils, early intervention and casework. A clear service level statement is drawn up for each area receiving targeted support. Particular attention is given to early intervention, preventative work, transition between schools, disaffected young pupils, truancy-sweeps, excluded pupils, child-employment and child protection. The service works well with health, voluntary and other agencies to encourage attendance. Legal powers are used appropriately and prosecutions are in line with national averages.

150. Leadership and management of the service are very good, as are the committed, resourceful education welfare officers (EWOs) and attendance project workers. The service is aimed clearly at access and inclusion in education. The

service has worked hard to encourage schools to correctly record authorised and unauthorised absence and data is becoming more reliable. Schools rightly value this service highly.

151. A well-constructed strategy is translated well into action. The service takes seriously its duties in relation to specific groups, particularly children in public care, children at risk and Travellers' children. Criteria for the prioritisation of the service's work are appropriate and well understood by EWOs and schools. In practice this means that those schools and pupils with most needs receive intensive, practical support. The service provides good value for money.

Behaviour support

152. Support for behaviour is effective and provides good value for money. The behaviour support plan clearly articulates policy and practice, sets targets for improvement and is appropriately linked to the EDP. Levels of permanent exclusion are lower than the national average and have reduced significantly from 128 in 1997/8 to 39 in 1999/2000. The number of fixed term exclusions have increased, but the LEA has set targets to reduce them. The school survey reveals that this has not been a popular strategy with many schools.

153. The behaviour support services operate effectively. There are sound early intervention strategies and appropriate use of pupil retention grant and standards fund to develop in-school provision and to supplement it by contracting with colleges and voluntary organisations. An inter-agency project aimed at pupils exhibiting difficult behaviour in primary schools has produced impressive evidence of improvement through early intervention. A good selection of training support is available ranging from nationally accredited certificate courses to one-day courses. Over 25 schools have been involved in whole school approaches to developing the behaviour curriculum. Additionally, there has been more intensive and effective work with selected teachers including Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) and inexperienced teachers.

Health, safety, welfare, child protection

154. Health and safety provision is very good. The LEA has clear policies, issues guidance, provides training and responds to requests for advice on a wide range of health and safety issues. A risk assessment service is offered to schools. Officers are diligent about their role in preventing and responding to concerns about the safety of pupils and staff, in particular in relation to the transportation of pupils with SEN to and from school. Appropriate police checks are carried out on staff working with children. Key members of staff are designated to provide a rapid response to schools in emergencies.

155. The LEA meets its duties in relation to child protection. The authority has an area child protection committee that brings together representatives from relevant departments. Guidance given to schools is clear and easy to follow. Schools have a designated person, who has been trained, and the LEA maintains an up-to-date register of them. Training, appropriately led by a multi-disciplinary team, covered recent legislation including data protection and human rights. Liaison between

education and social services is unsatisfactory at the school level. Schools cite examples of poor response regarding children potentially at risk. Liaison with other agencies works well.

Children in public care

156. Support for children in public care is sound and improving rapidly and gives sound value for money. The council takes its role as corporate parent very seriously and has established a members' children forum to monitor and oversee work. Work is underway to ensure that the EDP, behaviour support plan and Quality Protects management action plan are coherent and understood across departments. The education and social services departments and the health authorities have collaborated effectively over this, and are proactively taking forward a number of promising initiatives to raise the attainment of pupils.

157. There is good leadership and management of support for pupils in public care. The work of the educational psychologist service, Education Welfare Service (EWS) and social services is well co-ordinated. A new team, drawn from across departments, has been appointed and begins work shortly.

158. The authority has collected data on 500 children in public care covering mobility, attendance and attainment. The percentage of pupils gaining at least one graded result at GCSE level improved from 17 percent in 1988/9 to 38 percent in 1999/00. However, this is still too low and below the Government target for 2002. Three children from public care are currently at university.

159. The LEA has completed training for designated staff in school and keeps a register of attendance. This training has focused on developing personal education plans for children in public care, and has been valued. Good quality guidance has been issued to schools: a pack is being prepared for foster carers.

160. This positive picture is reflected in the views collected on most school visits. However, there were a small number of cases of schools experiencing poor co-ordination and data sharing. The LEA is aware of this difficulty and work is being done to develop electronic systems for sharing data between departments and to ensure collaborative working.

Ethnic minority children

161. The support for ethnic minority pupils, including Travellers, is unsatisfactory.

162. The LEA has a very low, but increasing, proportion of pupils from ethnic minority groups. There are 20 different language groups represented and the pupils are scattered across 125 of the LEA's schools. Such a small but dispersed population presents particular challenges for the LEA. The EDP makes no reference to this group and the ethnic minority/traveller achievement plan does not articulate a clear policy to overcome these difficulties.

163. The LEA monitors thoroughly the attainment, attendance and levels of exclusion of ethnic minority pupils. However, support for pupils with English as an

additional language (EAL) varies. In schools visited, it ranged from good to unsatisfactory. Lack of teacher expertise in schools for teaching EAL has been a weakness, and there have been insufficient training opportunities provided by the LEA. Consequently, the LEA is equipping three teachers in the specialist teaching service to provide this training.

164. The LEA has an established service to Travellers. Most of the team work with two schools close to the only two permanent sites in the county. The school places team is not always aware of individual children. Recognising that some difficulties have arisen, the LEA is tightening procedures to identify Travelling children and place them in schools. There are sufficient places for secondary age pupils in Cumbria, but the LEA has not been able to identify these young Travellers.

Combating racism

165. The LEA has been slow to respond to the Macpherson report into the death of Stephen Lawrence. The local authority has recently formed an 'Access and Equity' committee to oversee work in this area that links the response of the police, social services and education. Corporate training is planned.

166. The authority monitors racist incidents. An education welfare officer has prepared a useful awareness raising document, 'Choice and Diversity', that has been distributed to schools and which includes procedures for dealing with and reporting racist incidents. Most headteachers in schools, but not all, visited were aware of the document, but few had taken active steps to raise awareness of diverse cultures. The LEA recognises that the EDP lacks sufficient focus on multicultural awareness and approaches to combating racism; an officer is formulating a plan to tackle these issues. Currently, the LEA is not challenging schools sufficiently. The increasing trend for ethnic minority families, including asylum seekers, to move into the county make education against racism a matter of some urgency.

Social inclusion

167. The LEA is making good headway in promoting social inclusion, apart from support relating to minority ethnic groups reported above. There is a good strategy for SEN inclusion. Appropriate priorities have been identified to improve attendance at school and reduce rates of exclusion while improving the motivation of all pupils. The EDP, Behaviour Support Plan and Quality Protects management plan reflect this strategy. There is good collaborative working across departments in the LEA at both organisational and operational level, and partnership with other agencies, such as the police and the two health authorities, are productive.

168. There are a number of initiatives linked to promoting social inclusion. This includes work within the Barrow EAZ that focuses on disaffection, attendance and exclusions. The Carlisle Achievement Zone, initiated by headteachers and monitored by the LEA, has social inclusion as a high priority.

169. There are elements of a social inclusion strategy in places. A members' working group has been given the task of developing a coherent LEA policy that brings these strands together.

Recommendations

In order to improve the supply of schools places:

- revise the school organisation plan to detail proposals for Special Education Needs, post-16 provision and remove surplus places.

In order to improve provision for pupils with no school place:

- implement revised procedures to increase the rate of re-integration of pupils; and
- implement plans to ensure all pupils receive full-time provision by 2002.

In order to improve the partnership with the social services department:

- investigate further how liaison between schools, the education department and social services can be improved.

In order to improve the attainment of ethnic minority groups and combat racism:

- improve the support and challenge to schools so that they can confidently tackle issues of cultural harmony and race relations within the curriculum;
- improve the expertise within the service to enable schools to support the needs of pupils with English as an Additional Language;
- devise a strategy to better meet the challenge of a dispersed population; and
- ensure that all Travellers' children have access to a school place or receive alternative provision.

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve the strategy for school improvement:

- ensure that the revised Education Development Plan for 2002:
- makes clear the link between audit and activities;
- makes the success criteria precise so that progress can be evaluated more efficiently;
- cross-references to other related plans and initiatives; and
- takes account of omissions identified above, for instance early years.

In order to improve the targeting of resources to need:

- put in place medium term financial planning, including for the Individual School's Budget;
- review the funding formula to ensure that it provides adequately and fairly for spending needs in schools and particularly for small primary schools, schools with significant numbers of surplus places, repairs and maintenance, under-fives and management support services; and
- implement plans to conduct cross-cutting Best Value reviews and strengthen the elements of competition and challenge.

In order to improve monitoring, support, challenge and intervention:

- as a matter of urgency, define clearly the expectations that the individual schools should have of the LEA's support and/or intervention, and use performance and other data held by the LEA to match support to the needs of individual schools; and
- provide schools with a quality assured guide to sources of consultancy and training outside the education department.

In order to improve the effective use of data by schools:

- work with headteachers to tailor the provision of data to the needs of small schools, including guidance on the use of pupil level data;
- improve the transfer of data from Key Stage 2 to secondary schools; and
- strengthen procedures so that aggregate targets set by primary schools are in line with 2002 LEA targets.

In order to improve support for governors:

- ensure that all visits to schools by inspector/advisers are followed up promptly by a brief note of visit, which is shared with the chair of the governing body showing the list of identified action points, and noting any relevant leadership and management issues at the school.

In order to improve the support for small schools:

- reduce the administration workloads of teaching headteachers by:

- issuing guidance to governors regarding minimum time allocated for this purpose through the Standards Fund;
- ensuring that inter-agency work is co-ordinated more effectively;
- making more effective use of the small schools' network for consultation;
- working with union representatives and other partners to examine the causes for a significant number of absences, and devise strategies to address this issue; and
- investigating the impact of LEA funding mechanisms in small schools with less than two full-time teachers and catering for three to eleven year olds.

In order to improve the support for early years:

- make clear the respective roles and the nature of the provision to be made by the nursery schools and classes.

In order to improve the corporate working of the council:

- ensure that other major plans and service level plans are aligned with the corporate plan;
- implement procedures for evaluating the effectiveness of implementing the corporate plan; and
- ensure that the council performance management system is implemented in the education department;

In order to improve the quality of management services to schools:

- establish consultation arrangements with schools to ensure that a full range of support services is available to meet their developing needs; that the provision of information is full and timely; that consultation on service planning and review is appropriate and well co-ordinated; and that the development of formula funding takes proper account of procuring services; and
- produce a single strategic development plan for information management and information and communication technology support covering planned activities, timescales, resource implications, performance indicators and targets, and circulate to all schools. Consider ways in which the process of procurement can be simplified for schools that wish it, for example unified ordering, billing and customer feedback arrangements.

In order to improve the provision for special educational needs:

- improve the availability of SEN specialist advice and training for non-specialist link advisers for schools.

In order to improve the supply of schools places:

- revise the school organisation plan to detail proposals for SEN, post-16 provision and remove surplus places.

In order to improve provision for pupils with no school place:

- implement revised procedures to increase the rate of re-integration of pupils; and
- implement plans to ensure all pupils receive full-time provision by 2002.

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**Office for Standards in Education
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE**

Tel: 020 7421 6800

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