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IN EDUCATION**

**INSPECTION OF
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LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

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INTRODUCTION

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

2. The inspection was partly based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA; on school inspection information and audit reports; on documentation and discussions with LEA members, council staff, headteachers and governors, representation from the dioceses and other partners. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on aspects of the LEA's work was circulated to all schools. The overall response rate was very high, at 95 per cent.

3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to six primary schools, two infant schools, three junior schools, four secondary schools, the LEA's one special school and the secondary pupil referral unit. These visits tested the views of governors, headteachers and other staff on the key aspects of the LEA's strategy. The visits also considered whether the support which is provided by the LEA contributes to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in schools and provides value for money. Further evidence from HMI inspection of the implementation of the national literacy and numeracy strategies was also considered.

COMMENTARY

4. Bracknell Forest is one of six unitary authorities created by the break-up of the former Berkshire Local Education Authority (LEA) as part of the reorganisation of local government (LGR) in April 1998. It is the seventh smallest education authority, with a population of 114,000. That population is projected to grow by 20 per cent over the next decade, a growth strongly associated with the rapid economic development of the area, which is dominated by companies associated with high technology. The area is generally prosperous, but there are some pockets of social deprivation. The percentage of pupils from minority ethnic groups is well below the national average.

5. The performance of pupils is overall above the national average in primary schools and at Key Stage 3, and average at Key Stage 4. The rate of improvement has been average at Key Stage 1, overall below average at Key Stages 2 and 3, and below average at Key Stage 4. Post-16 results are below the national average, and the rate of improvement is well below the national trend.

6. The new LEA has made a good start. Elected members have quickly and confidently assumed responsibility for education, and have established a clear vision and strategy. They are very well advised by the director of education, who, with his senior colleagues, provides excellent professional leadership for the service. A productively challenging and mutually confident relationship with schools has been established which is characterised by very effective consultation. The LEA is strongly customer focused and has excellent mechanisms for canvassing schools' views. Its capacity to achieve continuous improvement through self-review is admirable.

7. What is most immediately striking about the LEA is the clarity, coherence and consistency of its planning and performance management processes. The LEA's support for school improvement is good. The most immediately relevant service, curriculum quality and achievement, is very well managed and provides professional support which is of high quality and effective in many areas, particularly in primary schools. The quality of the LEA's support for pupils with special educational needs is a significant achievement.

8. And yet, the progress made in raising standards is no better than average, and, at Key Stage 4 and above, disappointing. This is not because the LEA fails to challenge its schools sufficiently, nor because it has been afraid to tackle difficult issues. As a result of extensive intervention by the LEA, two out of the six secondary schools are recovering from deep-seated difficulties and are well placed for further improvement. A review of post-16 education has resulted in a well focused strategic plan, which is currently subject to consultation.

9. The LEA's performance in all but a few functions is often good, and at least satisfactory. It has particular strengths in the following:

- the quality of its Education Development Plan (EDP);
- targeting resources to priorities;
- the monitoring, challenge, intervention and support provided to schools;
- services to support school improvement;

- support for literacy, numeracy, and information and communication technology (ICT) in the curriculum;
- support for schools causing concern;
- support for school management and governors;
- support for early years;
- corporate planning for education, decision making, and the quality of leadership given by members and senior officers;
- support to schools from financial services; personnel and ICT for school administration;
- the strategy and provision for special educational needs (SEN);
- asset management planning; and
- support for health, safety, welfare and child protection.

The weaknesses are few, but important, and are:

- support for gifted and talented pupils;
- provision for pupils who have no school place;
- support for behaviour;
- the effectiveness of measures taken to combat racism; and
- the effectiveness of measures taken to combat social exclusion.

10. This is a good LEA which has achieved much in a relatively short time. Its small size has required ruthless prioritising; this it has done with considerable success. In many areas of its work the LEA provides a model for others to follow. However, increasing difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers will make it more difficult to further raise performance. An obstacle to progress is the insufficiently high priority given by the council to social inclusion, which does not address the needs of the most vulnerable pupils. The LEA has been unable to overcome the reluctance of some schools to accommodate pupils with behavioural difficulties. As a result, the incidence of fixed and permanent exclusions is unacceptably high and re-integration rates are low. This report makes some recommendations which should further assist the council in planning for improvement.

11. With proven leadership of a very high quality and with very capable senior officers, there is no doubt that the LEA has good capacity to address its few weaknesses.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

12. Bracknell Forest, one of six unitary authorities created from the break-up of the former Berkshire County Council at the time of the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in April 1998, is the seventh smallest education authority. The largest town, Bracknell, was established as a new town in the 1950s. The borough has an estimated population of 114,000 which is increasing at a rapid rate, with an anticipated growth of around 20 per cent over the next decade. A number of large companies, particularly those associated with electronics-based technology, have based their headquarters in the area.

13. The local economy is strong and no wards are classed as deprived, but the relatively high cost of housing means that schools are encountering increasing difficulties with recruiting and retaining teachers. Levels of unemployment are low and the proportion of primary pupils eligible for free schools meals (8.2 per cent), is below the national average (19.7 per cent), as is the secondary figure (6.1 per cent, compared with 17.6 per cent). The percentage of pupils from minority ethnic groups (3.6 per cent), compares with a national figure of 12.1 per cent. Half of the ethnic minority pupils in Bracknell Forest are from European 'other white' groups. Few pupils have English as an additional language.

14. The borough maintains six 11-18 comprehensive schools, all with sixth forms. There are six infant, six junior and 21 primary schools; 15 infant and primary schools have nursery classes. One special school admits children from nursery to age 18; three primary schools and one secondary school have specific special educational needs provision and one primary school has a language and literacy unit. There is one primary and one secondary pupil referral unit (PRU). Two schools, one primary and one secondary, have been awarded Beacon status.

15. At the end of Key Stage 2, 24 per cent of pupils transfer to secondary schools in other authorities; some of this is due to geographical factors. This figure includes a slightly higher proportion of higher attaining pupils. In five of the borough's six secondary schools there is a drift of pupils to nearby post-16 establishments outside of the borough's boundaries, which accounts for 13 per cent of the total Year 11 cohort.

16. The proportions of pupils with statements of special educational need are 2.4 per cent in primary schools and 3.7 per cent in secondary schools, broadly in line with the national figures of 2.7 per cent and 4.0 per cent respectively.

17. Sufficient nursery provision is secured for all four year olds, and two thirds are on the roll of Bracknell Forest maintained schools. Currently, six per cent of three year olds are in maintained provision, and a further 51 per cent are provided for in settings that are part of the early years partnership.

Performance

18. Schools' OFSTED inspection reports, and the LEA's own baseline assessment data, shows attainment on entry to primary schools to be above that found nationally. A considerably higher percentage of pupils under five make good progress when compared with the national average.

19. Results in all core subjects have improved at Key Stages 1-3 since 1998, when Bracknell Forest took over responsibility for schools, and pupils' progress between Key Stages 1 and 3 is broadly in line with the national average. However, this is not sustained at Key Stage 4; results have not risen and pupils' progress is below average. Post-16 results have not improved.

20. In 2000, the percentage of pupils achieving Level 2 and above in the Key Stage 1 tests, and Level 4 and above in the Key Stage 2 tests, was above the national average and broadly in line with statistical neighbours.

21. At Key Stage 3, the percentage of pupils achieving Level 5 and above in English and mathematics was above the national average and in line with that of statistical neighbours. In science, results were broadly in line with national and statistical neighbour averages.

22. At Key Stage 4, the percentage of pupils achieving five or more A*-C grades was in line with the national average, but below that of statistical neighbours. Figures for pupils achieving one or more A*-G grades were in line with national and statistical neighbour averages. The average GCSE point score was broadly in line with the national average, but below that of similar authorities.

23. At age 18, the average A-level points score was below the national and statistical neighbours' average. The point score for Advanced GNVQ was in line with national and statistical neighbours' figures.

24. School inspection data shows that the percentage of overall good and very good primary schools (80 per cent) is above the national average (70 per cent) and that of statistical neighbours (75 per cent). The figure for secondary schools (67 per cent) is in line with the national average (67 per cent) and broadly in line with statistical neighbours (76 per cent).

25. The LEA inherited a secondary school with serious weaknesses. Since 1998, one primary school has also been identified in this category. These weaknesses have now been resolved.

26. In 1999/2000, the rate of permanent exclusions was well above the national figure for primary and secondary schools (0.7 and 6.0 respectively, compared with national figures of 0.3 and 3.0), though declining. Attendance in primary schools was above the national figure, and secondary schools were broadly in line with this figure. The level of unauthorised absence was below the national figure for primary schools and broadly in line with this for secondary schools.

Funding

27. The Council funds education at the level of the Standard Spending Assessment (exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1

	SSA for education £m	Net expenditure on education £m	Expenditure as % of SSA
1998/99	39.7	39.5	99.5% (-0.5%)
1999/00	41.6	41.5	99.9% (-0.1%)
2000/01	43.1	43.1	100%
2001/02	45.0	45.0	100%

28. In 2000/01 Bracknell Forest delegated slightly less of the Local Schools Budget (82.3 per cent) than similar authorities (84.1 per cent) and nationally (84.2 per cent). In 2001/02 it increased delegation to 85.1 per cent to meet the DfES target. The gross delegated funding per pupil in 2000/01 was slightly lower than the England average for primary and secondary schools, as well as for the one special school.

29. The LEA has met the DfES targets for delegation in 2000/01 and 2001/02. The Fair Funding consultation in Autumn 2000 showed that Bracknell Forest schools did not support further increases in delegation proposed by the LEA.

30. In 2000/01, Bracknell Forest LEA's expenditure on centrally-provided services is above the unitary and national average in all the Fair Funding areas except access and non-devolved Standards Fund grants. Expenditure is particularly high on strategic management - both statutory and regulatory duties and other strategic management, and on home to school transport.

31. Taking into account both delegated and centrally-retained funding, Bracknell Forest spends slightly above the average for similar LEAs and nationally on SEN. Central spending on fees for pupils at independent special schools is, at £89 per pupil, twice the national average (£42). Recoupment expenditure is also much higher than the national average, reflecting the use of schools in neighbouring authorities for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties, and for low incidence disabilities. Funding delegated to schools for pupils with special educational needs but without statements is below the national average.

32. Capital expenditure has increased over the last three years and is now slightly above the national average. Over two thirds of the total comes from a share of the council's capital receipts and developers' contributions.

Council structure

33. In 1998, the new council, made up of 30 Conservative and 10 Labour members, adopted a traditional committee structure with an emphasis on devolved delegation and decision making. This comprises five cross-party service committees, including the education committee. Each service committee can appoint up to four focus groups of officers and members to consider and report on specific issues. Terms of reference are succinctly and clearly set out. The delegation of authority to the education committee and the director of education is effective in achieving efficient and co-ordinated decision making within strong systems for consultation and accountability. Diocesan representation rightly reports a high level of confidence in this structure.

34. The four sub committees reporting to the education committee are primarily responsible for decisions in implementing agreed policies in operations, quality assurance, transport and awards, and governor selection. A consultation panel is the main channel for consultation between teachers and the education committee; its members are justified in reporting that this has lost its impetus, although this is under review. A teachers' joint consultative committee considers teachers' conditions of service. A joint advisory sub committee on children's services was recently and appropriately designated a decision-making sub committee of social services with a strengthened remit for working with education.

35. The council proposes to move to a leader and cabinet system by November 2001, in line with Government requirements to reconsider council structures.

The Education Development Plan

36. The LEA has a good Education Development Plan (EDP), arrived at following an extensive and wide-ranging audit, and from thorough consultation with headteachers, governors and elected members. Schools visited strongly supported the plan and felt it provided an effective structure for continuing school improvement. Priorities take good account of national priorities as well as local circumstances and have been identified as:

- Raising attainment in literacy;
- Raising attainment in numeracy;
- Raising standards achieved by children with special or additional educational needs;
- Promoting quality schools;
- Promoting effective teaching and classroom practice; and
- Promoting opportunities for learning in schools and beyond.

37. There are clear links between priorities, activities and actions within and across activity areas. The focus and purpose of activities and outcomes are well targeted and review procedures, based on highly effective monitoring and evaluation, support purposeful and successful implementation. Procedures for reviewing progress are excellent. Resources are tightly aligned to priorities and costs and staffing levels are appropriate.

38. The EDP is one of a number of strategies to raise educational standards. It clearly reflects the council's corporate values and sits firmly within the Best Value Performance Plan. Good linkage is made with other plans including the early years development and childcare plan (EYDCP) and the LEA's strategy for lifelong learning. There is some linkage with the behaviour support plan (BSP), although this is not sufficiently detailed. The LEA's commitment to improving the performance of schools causing concern or experiencing specific difficulties is identified within each of the six priority areas.

39. Whilst the target setting process is rigorous and challenging, and is increasingly supported by good quality data, the overall challenge to schools is variable. The LEA's 2002 target for literacy is ambitious, whilst the original target for numeracy was conservative. This was rightly raised by the LEA, from 78 per cent to 80 per cent, on the basis of improving pupil level data, but this is still cautious and quite likely to be exceeded. The 2002 target for higher grade GCSE passes (52 per cent) is challenging on current performance, but not sufficiently aspirational. Targets for unauthorised absence are appropriately challenging. The exclusion target for 2002 (26 pupils), is still well above that being achieved currently by like, and similar sized, authorities.

Progress in implementing the Education Development Plan

40. Progress on implementing the EDP is satisfactory. A very detailed and comprehensive review of progress against outcomes for each activity indicates overall satisfactory, and sometimes good, progress within most priority areas. However, slow progress has been made in implementing activities designed to raise further the achievements of gifted and talented pupils. A continuing analysis of schools' development plans ensures that monitoring by attached advisers remains a valid measure of effectiveness, and the education committee is well informed of progress through regular reports.

41. In 2000, Key Stage 2 targets in English and mathematics have been exceeded. However, the proportion of pupils achieving five or more higher grades at GCSE (47 per cent), was below the target figure (51 per cent). The average GCSE point score achieved (39) was in line with the LEA's target. In part, this lack of progress is due to the need for intensive recovery programmes, and recruitment and retention difficulties in two of the LEA's six secondary schools, and disappointing results in a third. Post-16 results have not improved. Four out of the eight children leaving public care gained at least one GCSE or GNVQ qualification, as compared to the target of six. Permanent exclusion figures have fallen from 52 in 1999 to 29 in 2000, and stand at 16 to date.

42. The LEA has rightly adapted the EDP to give greater emphasis to raising pupil achievement at Key Stage 3 and post-16, to the dissemination of good practice and to additional strategies to recruit and retain staff whilst still recognising the pressing concern to reduce exclusion figures and to raise attainment at Key Stage 4. Considerable attention has been given to strategies to raise performance at Key Stage 4 and post-16 including alternative curriculum models, an analysis of subject residuals, and school-based reviews, but the impact in schools has been limited.

43. A critical issue for the LEA and for members is to further reduce the number of excluded pupils. This entails a review of curriculum provision at Key Stage 4 as outlined in the EDP, prioritising the preventative role of the pupil referral service in line with its expressed aim, and challenging further the culture of exclusion which exists in some schools. This is being tackled to some extent through heavy investment in well targeted school-based projects which are more extensive in range and scope than described in the EDP, and which specifically address behaviour management and strategies to improve teaching.

The Allocation of resources to priorities

44. Bracknell Forest LEA has good systems for allocating resources to agreed priorities. A well thought-out corporate budget strategy links corporate, financial and service planning across the authority within a common timescale. In education, budgets are carefully planned over a three-year period and regularly monitored in line with the service's medium-term priorities. Budgetary control is good except for the growing demand for out of borough SEN placements, where the LEA has rightly strengthened monitoring. Headteachers, governors and bursars of schools are well involved and informed about budget-planning through meetings with councillors and officers during the process. Schools have agreed to match funding for Standards Funding in specific areas from their delegated budgets in order to maximise expenditure.

45. Resources have been allocated effectively to priorities agreed with schools such as schools causing concern, additional funding at Key Stage 2, initiatives to improve recruitment and retention of teachers and the resourcing of a secondary PRU. Areas where expenditure is not under control, SEN and home to school transport, have been appropriately targeted for Best Value Reviews.

46. The current school funding formula is based on that inherited from Berkshire and is well understood by schools. The formula is highly pupil-led through the age-weighted pupil unit (AWPU). Funding for additional educational needs is based on free school meals and test results and is comparatively low. The LEA is rightly carrying out an in-depth review of the formula in conjunction with school representatives, using an activity-led model. The aim is to simplify the formula and move towards more needs-based factors for April 2002. Schools manage their finances well and the few with deficits are on track to pay these off under the LEA's licensed deficit scheme.

Structures for securing Best Value

47. Bracknell Forest council's arrangements for Best Value show significant strengths, but some areas of weakness. It has good structures in place to deliver Best Value and the 2000 Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) received an unqualified audit. The authority has so far been less effective in carrying out Best Value Reviews. The objectives in the BVPP are well-linked to those in service plans and, in the education department, to individual staff objectives. Monitoring of service performance and expenditure through the quarterly operation reports is thorough. Although the role of elected members in the process is now developing with the establishment of the Best Value members panel, this is not clearly enough communicated in the BVPP and its impact is not yet visible.

48. The authority has learned from the over-ambitious year 1 programme of Best Value Reviews and has substantially reduced the number of reviews planned and widened their focus. There are few completed Year 1 reviews and none in education so it is not possible to assess their impact. The interim report of the review of SEN shows thorough analysis of the service and good use of data, but an excessively narrow focus on support for statemented pupils and on costs rather than quality and outcomes. Leadership of the review by the SEN service manager makes the demonstration of adequate challenge more difficult.

49. The LEA has provided schools with a good model Best Value policy but school visits suggest most have made little progress in putting Best Value principles into practice in the procurement of services.

Recommendations

In order to support improvement at Key Stage 4:

- strengthen advice and support for alternative approaches to the National Curriculum for disaffected pupils and determine the impact of this support through targeting and challenging individual schools in line with performance, attendance, and exclusion data.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Implications of other functions

50. From its inception, the LEA has systematically provided overall good support for school improvement through good strategic planning, high quality leadership and a successful professional partnership with schools. The main contributor, Curriculum, Quality and Achievement, is effective in a considerable range of functions, although this has not resulted in a rise in standards in secondary schools. Difficulties in recruiting subject specialists, particularly in mathematics, are a significant impediment to improving pupil performance. Support for pupils with special educational needs is a strength of the LEA and financial services, personnel, and services supporting the use of ICT in school administration provide an effective infrastructure for schools. However, the LEA's efforts to encourage schools to become more self-sufficient in the procurement of services have had limited impact.

51. There is a strong early years partnership. The partnership with post-16 providers, through the lifelong learning partnership, is very recent, but improving.

52. The Council does not have an overarching strategy for social inclusion. This is an obstacle to progress as evidenced by the very high level of exclusions and uneven provision for pupils with no school place.

Monitoring, challenge, support, intervention

53. The LEA's strategy for monitoring, challenge, support and intervention is good. The respective roles of the LEA and schools are clearly set out in a written protocol, and school visits indicated that they are thoroughly understood. The same clarity of definition is broadly characteristic of the LEA's approach to its statutory functions under the School Standards and Framework Act. Both it, and the schools, are very clear as to the principles involved, and their operation in practice. Monitoring, intervention, support and challenge are well defined in exemplary documentation and thoroughly embedded in the role of the attached advisers.

54. The LEA has formulated and agreed with schools comprehensive 'Criteria for School Evaluation and Development'. On the basis of these, and from monitoring data and well grounded evidence, schools are allocated to one of four categories, and receive monitoring and support in line with their needs. The emphasis is on early support to prevent schools moving into the category of grave concern, and the level of intervention required to prevent this is clearly prescribed. Progress reports detailing the impact of support are regularly submitted to a school improvement group comprising officers and headteachers, which is effective in developing and reviewing the LEA's approach to school improvement.

55. The LEA takes the view, rightly, that schools are principally responsible for bringing about their own improvement, and that its own role is to work in partnership with them. The emphasis on partnership does not, however, preclude challenge. Monitoring visits and discussions of target-setting, for example, are conducted with great rigour. Many examples of change brought about through LEA challenge were evident. Headteachers confirmed that the rigour of the LEA's approach, although

sometimes uncomfortable, was right in principle, and productive in practice. In relation to target-setting, challenge consisted, not just of insistence on higher targets in individual schools, but of searching discussion of ways in which the targets might best be achieved.

56. The distinction between monitoring and support is, intentionally, not sharply drawn. No visiting is undertaken solely for information-gathering purposes; all visits are intended to support change. All schools have an "entitlement" to a minimum of three days of monitoring visits. These are welcomed by schools, effectively carried out and a reasonable strategy for a new authority to adopt, at a stage when its schools are working towards greater expertise in self-evaluation. The self-evaluation materials used, however, are in need of review, since they do not deal adequately with resource management. At present, schools are at different stages of development, although a considerable number are designated as being fully capable of bringing about self-improvement. As schools become more effective in promoting their own improvement, so the rationale for retaining funding centrally for universal visiting will be less sustainable. This is not an argument for reducing the number of visits, but for locating the ultimate accountability for improvement within schools themselves in that they assume responsibility for deciding the level of support required from the LEA, as they do currently through the work of the school improvement group.

57. The main responsibility for providing monitoring, challenge, intervention and support resides with the CQA of the education department. This small (and currently understaffed) team is very highly regarded by the schools, and rightly so. It is very well-led, expertly managed and effective in a wide range of its activities.

58. Members and the director set a clear vision for school improvement. That vision is reinforced and given practical expression by the assistant director (CQA), who provides excellent leadership. A strong team ethos has been created in the service, whilst guarding against the insularity that might occur in a small team working very closely together.

59. Service planning is very good. Priorities are consistent with the EDP, but are nevertheless reviewed annually against a wide range of evidence which includes an analysis of the priorities defined in school improvement plans. Where other evidence suggests that these are not the right, or not the sole, priorities, schools are consulted further, through a number of consultative groups, which prominently includes the school improvement group. Full account is also taken of the council's medium term objectives in setting priorities. Throughout the hierarchy of plans, match between priorities, targets, activities, specific actions, including individual objectives, and intended outcomes is very good, so that there is a very strong sense of strategic direction, leading to purposeful activity.

60. That framework of planning underpins good performance management procedures. CQA is particularly successful in ensuring consistency of performance by attached advisors because of the close nature of its team working. Major judgements about schools are made by consensus, usually at the formal weekly team meeting, or more generally through daily contact. Appropriate emphasis is

given to induction and training, and the assistant director uses a range of appropriate methods to regularly monitor the work of the team.

61. There is a considerable amount of joint working, and the contact record sheets, which contain notes of discussions with schools and action points arising as well as records of observations, are moderated. All advisers undertake some work in other LEAs, to guard against insularity, and the assistant director monitors their workload, in order to prevent over-commitment.

62. The core of the service consists of the assistant director, a principal adviser, two senior advisers and a general adviser with a specific brief for SEN. All have a cluster of allocated schools, as well as a wide range of responsibilities for subjects and aspects of the curriculum. All have considerable credibility in school management, but would not claim outstanding expertise in all that they cover. Their role, therefore, is frequently not to provide advice, training or consultancy, but to coordinate the provision by others. Included within this is the provision of brokerage advice to schools who wish to engage external providers.

63. The service, because of its evident quality, is not scheduled for a Best Value Review until late in the cycle. Its very size, however, forces it constantly to ask how best and by whom advice may be provided. It has highly effective management processes and provides or secures good support for schools at a cost which is not excessive.

Collection and analysis of data

64. The LEA has good systems in place for the collection and analysis of performance data, and provides schools with good quality information. Schools receive a comprehensive range of useful local information to support the use of national performance information. Most schools report this combination as effective in enabling them to monitor pupils' progress and to plan for improvement. This package includes value-added data which tracks individual pupils as they progress through primary schools, and from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4. This data does not yet allow the LEA to track pupil progress from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3. Given the below average rate of improvement in mathematics and science at Key Stage 3, this is an important gap, although the LEA has plans to address this. The provision of pupil level value-added data, including baseline data, enables primary schools to set targets for groups of pupils, and to allocate additional resources to those in need of learning support. A recent analysis of the performance of pupil groups by ethnicity has not been fully shared with schools. Schools have received good training on the use of data to support school self-evaluation and on 'Assessment Manager'.

65. Promoting strategies for effective transition between key stages is an activity within the EDP. Considerable progress has been made this year in the form of electronic transfer of Key Stage 2 data to secondary schools. This information is used to group pupils and to identify learning needs. Secondary schools also receive information on pupils who may be at risk because of SEN, welfare or behavioural issues. Other measures to support effective transition are in place, notably cross-phase subject leader meetings and training opportunities for secondary teachers to consider end of Key Stage 2 test material.

66. The LEA provides clear guidance on target-setting. Attached advisers are well trained in this role and schools report target-setting meetings to be rigorous and challenging, but with good support for strategies to improve. Most schools stated that the achievement of these targets presented a considerable challenge to them, but that meetings had a significant impact on improvements in literacy and numeracy. In 2000, 25 out of 27 schools met Key Stage 2 targets for literacy, and 23 in numeracy. Four out of six secondary schools met 5 A*-C GCSE targets.

Support for Literacy

67. Support for literacy is good; well regarded by schools, well managed and effective. It is the first priority in the EDP, and the activities and actions intended to support it are carefully set out, and equally carefully monitored and evaluated, in the literacy action plan, which is a very useful working document. The plan and the work done in the implementation of it necessarily focus on the National Literacy Strategy, while addressing some local priorities, such as the underachievement of boys. Good use is made of ICT. This figures prominently, and teaching materials seen on the school websites were of very good quality. Further use of ICT is intended to provide pupils absent or excluded from school with access to learning materials. Good links have been made with SEN teams and the early years partnership.

68. The rise in standards at Key Stage 2 has been steady, rather than spectacular. In 2000, 78 per cent of pupils achieved Level 4, a rise of 9 per cent over three years. In the circumstances, the target of 86 per cent for 2002 appears demanding, but achievable, particularly since statistics show that the work on boys' achievement is having some effect.

69. Recent changes in personnel have not adversely affected the smooth working of the team, or its delivery of training and consultancy. Evidence from school visits was that support for literacy was at least satisfactory, and usually good. The literacy consultant and strategy manager are well supported by the monitoring undertaken by the attached advisers, all of whom have received appropriate training. The work of the literacy team is very precisely targeted, to four categories of school: intensive, priority, additional support and light touch. The categorisation is sensibly flexible, and takes account, for example, of changes in subject leadership.

70. The EDP outlines a good approach to literacy in secondary schools. The LEA has held a successful conference for headteachers, and is developing a package of support for teachers. An audit of Key Stage 3 provision is planned. Some teachers have observed Year 5 and 6 classes in primary schools in order to plan more effectively for the transition between Key Stage 2 and 3. Literacy summer schools, have been successful in providing additional literacy support for lower attaining pupils. The LEA's good support to schools for planning, training staff, monitoring provision and evaluating the impact of summer schools was highly valued by schools.

Support for Numeracy

71. Support for numeracy in primary schools is good; it is well-managed, highly regarded by the schools and effective. Numeracy is a priority in the EDP. The

actions and activities undertaken in pursuit of it are set out in a detailed and comprehensive action plan. Implementation is securely on track and has been carefully monitored and evaluated on a termly basis by the strategy manager. The quality of the training provided has been good, and the work of the numeracy consultant is well-regarded and effective. Take-up of the work of leading mathematics teachers, originally disappointing, has improved as a result of opportunities for teachers to observe good practice as part of the five-day course. School visits showed that support for numeracy had been at least satisfactory, and usually good.

72. The numeracy target of 80 per cent of pupils reaching Level 4 at Key Stage 2 by 2002 is relatively conservative, and the LEA's schools are well on the way to achieving it, since 76 per cent already did so in 2000. Overall improvement to date has been at about the national rate. Realising the need to be more ambitious, the LEA has set a target for Level 5 for more able pupils; it is also working more extensively on teaching strategies to develop pupils' understanding and application of mathematics.

73. The LEA's strategy for support to secondary schools is good. The numeracy consultant responsible for leading that element of the Key Stage 3 strategy has only just been appointed, but schools view the support previously given for mathematics as having been effective. The most difficult issue facing the LEA as it implements the National Numeracy Strategy in Key Stage 3 is the shortage of qualified mathematics teachers. A considerable proportion of mathematics lessons in this key stage are taught by temporary teachers or those who are not qualified in mathematics. This will necessarily influence the nature of the training that will be provided. An audit of needs is currently being conducted, following a programme of Year 7 visits carried out by a seconded primary headteacher in preparation for the Key Stage 3 strategy. More liaison between primary and secondary schools is planned, with Year 7 teachers working with Year 6 pupils.

74. The focus of the LEA's work is beginning to broaden, to include more than the national literacy and numeracy strategies. For example, the LEA is aware of a considerable proportion of adults who do not have adequate basic skills. It has sensibly established a task group, and undertaken some successful work in family literacy and numeracy. As this work extends, the direction of literacy and numeracy will be appropriately steered by the lifelong learning partnership.

Support for Information and Communications Technology

75. Support for ICT is good. The EDP outlines a clear vision and strategy for ICT which is well focused on raising attainment and improving pupils' capability in the use of ICT across the curriculum. Actions are well targeted, carefully monitored, and detail innovative uses of ICT to promote learning within schools, across schools, and within the community. For example, through local employers developing curriculum materials. Family learning in schools, albeit on a small scale, is proving successful in involving local communities in the use of ICT. However, despite this strong focus on raising attainment, the ICT development plan lacks a clear definition of outcomes for pupil capability.

76. The authority has taken full and timely advantage of national developments and is the lead authority for the South East Grid for Learning. The LEA's strategy for the provision of equipment and training is effective, and there has been a good increase in the number of high quality computers in schools. Schools have been well advised on the procurement and location of hardware, and very well supported through a borough-wide infrastructure of internet training. There is good linkage with the use of ICT for management and administration. Significant to the LEA's vision for ICT is a 'school of the future group', chaired by the director of education, which takes good account of the developing use of ICT in improving teaching quality.

77. Support for the use of ICT in the curriculum is good and most schools are positive about advice from the LEA. This is based on a thorough and up-to-date audit from schools and is well focused on raising attainment. Schools' plans for the use of National Grid for Learning (NGfL) funding are meticulously monitored through regular visits, and from a logging system which monitors the number of calls made to the help-line. New Opportunities Fund (NOF) training is well managed and fully supported. Additional training provided by the authority allows teachers to gain the maximum benefit from this national initiative. Effective subject leaders, as well as good classroom practitioners, are well used to advise and support other schools. Good use has been made of the expertise of an advanced skills teacher (AST) through membership of the ICT and NOF working groups, participation in ICT subject leader meetings, and outstanding work across the curriculum in one secondary school. Schools report that good use of websites is promoting an increase in research-based approaches to learning. A termly ICT newsletter is well received by schools.

78. OFSTED inspection reports show ICT as a strong subject at Key Stage 1, and as significantly strong at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4. These reports also indicate that between 1997-1999, pupils in primary schools made significantly better progress in ICT than that found nationally. At Key Stage 3, Teacher Assessment data collected from all secondary schools in 2000, indicates standards broadly in line with national figures. There is good evidence from school visits that pupil capability is further improving as a result of NOF training and LEA advice. Portfolios of work are well used by schools as evidence of standards and for assessing pupils' skills.

79. Technical support is delivered through on-site support combined with a contact helpline both from the authority and from the major hardware provider. Training provided for network managers is very highly rated by schools. Technical advice is overall satisfactory, although during busy periods the response time is too slow.

Support for schools causing concern

80. Support for schools causing concern is good. The LEA is effective in identifying and supporting schools that are causing concern and has been successful in helping them to improve. A significant feature of the LEA's approach is the good balance of rigorous challenge and professional development.

81. The percentage of schools identified by OFSTED as requiring some or much improvement is below the national average in primary schools and in line with this in

secondary schools. On becoming a unitary authority in April 1998, the LEA inherited one secondary school identified as having serious weaknesses; another received an unsatisfactory OFSTED report later in the same year. Since April 1998, only one primary school has been identified by OFSTED as having serious weaknesses. No schools have been designated as in need of special measures. The LEA's very effective monitoring system has recently identified a further primary school as giving cause for concern, and appropriate action has been taken.

82. In both secondary schools, decisive action, considerable financial investment, effective working with governors and well targeted support has resulted in the removal of one school from serious weaknesses within the required timescale. The other has made limited progress, owing to complex personnel issues which have been very well managed by the director of education. The recruitment and retention of teachers will greatly influence the rate of future progress. Very good progress has been made in the primary school. All three schools were visited. There was clear evidence of improvements in each, much of which was directly attributable to the LEA's work.

83. The school improvement policy is a comprehensive and thorough document which provides a clear strategic statement on the identification and categorisation of schools causing concern. All schools are allocated to one of four categories, which are reviewed twice-yearly. Statutory responsibilities are appropriately detailed, procedures for communicating increased levels of concern to headteachers, chairs of governors and members are clear and support and monitoring procedures are good. An LEA-school protocol is excellent in describing the role of the LEA, members and officers in supporting and challenging schools causing concern. This is an effective and well implemented system; schools are accurately matched to category, and since September 2000, three schools have improved their categorisation.

84. Schools causing concern are given good guidance on action planning and receive well planned, well targeted and well co-ordinated support in line with their needs. A research programme, commissioned by the LEA to provide critical support to the secondary school with serious weaknesses, is a testimony to the LEA's determination for improvement. Progress is closely monitored by attached advisers; reports to the headteacher and governing body are very comprehensive and greatly assist progress. Progress is regularly reviewed through the schools of concern group, which includes representation from a range of education services. This group determines levels of further support and chairs of governors and headteachers are kept fully informed of discussions and any action the LEA proposes to take. Members receive regular and very comprehensive reports on individual schools through the education quality assurance sub-committee; these meetings involve a detailed scrutiny of progress and are attended by headteachers and governors of schools inspected, as well as those from schools causing concern.

Support for school management

85. Support for school management is good. The LEA offers a good range of high quality support, which is effective in improving the expertise of headteachers to evaluate their own schools, and middle managers to assume leadership responsibilities. Although schools are clear that support is relevant and of high quality, they are less clear about an overall strategy for continuing professional development.

86. The LEA fully supports the development of senior managers through the National Professional Qualification for Headteachers (NPQH) and the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers (LPSH). Headteachers rate LPSH highly, and value the opportunity for continuing professional development on completion. School improvement conferences for headteachers and deputies are held annually, and have been particularly successful in progressing major initiatives in the primary phase. Primary and secondary headteachers have well established networks for management support outside of those provided by the LEA; these, and links with alternative training providers, are actively encouraged. Deputies are less well supported. Schools are mixed in their understanding of the functioning of the deputy headteacher support group, and a number made reference to the need for greater support.

87. Training on school self-review is a major part of the LEA's school improvement agenda. Accredited training has been very well received. On the back of this, and in line with the LEA's 'Criteria for School Evaluation and Development', attached advisers contribute significantly to school improvement. They have good management expertise, offer a very high level of advice and support, and rightly deserve the high credibility afforded them. Headteachers welcome the very good balance of support and rigorous challenge which is the hallmark of the LEA, and gave numerous examples of advisers successfully working with schools on supported self-review activities which have strengthened management capability and increased schools' capacity to monitor teaching quality and to evaluate themselves.

88. The LEA's professional development programme is comprehensive in coverage and firmly linked to the EDP. It provides well for the continuing professional development of subject leaders in primary and secondary schools through regular cross-phase meetings which are highly rated by schools. Schools visited gave numerous examples of the impact of training on improving subject leadership and teaching quality. Provision, quality assurance and the evaluation of the impact of training for school managers, teaching and support staff is effectively managed through a professional development advisory group comprising representation from the LEA and schools.

89. The dissemination of good practice is satisfactory, but activities do not comprise a coherent strategy. The LEA realises this, and there are good plans for improvement within the EDP. A termly 'Curriculum Update' is useful and informative in providing a good source of information and advice to schools, and the grouping of schools in line with EDP activities provides good opportunities for networking.

90. Since 1998, new headteachers have been appointed to over one third of the LEA's schools. Newly appointed headteachers are very well supported through termly induction seminars, also open to headteachers in their second year of headship, attached advisers, an experienced headteacher mentor, and a very useful induction pack. Support from the LEA, as well as from other headteachers, was highly rated and valued.

91. The LEA provides good support for Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs), which is highly rated by both primary and secondary schools. The training programme includes good provision for NQTs and mentors, and there are regular surgeries, network meetings and support from attached advisers. A handbook for new entrants to the teaching profession provides excellent guidance, information and advice to both NQTs and mentors.

92. Teacher supply is becoming a major issue for the LEA, and for secondary schools in particular. Despite the use of recruitment and retention incentives, this has affected the appointment of subject specialists, and in two schools is affecting standards at Key Stage 3, as Key Stage 4 teaching is prioritised. A number of primary schools are concerned that known vacancies for September will not be filled. The LEA is now in a better position to address this increasing problem, having recently appointed a recruitment strategy manager, which it was previously unable to do. Although an extensive range of measures is being implemented including wide advertising, representation at recruitment fairs, a return to teaching course, the recruitment of teachers from overseas, and a key worker accommodation pilot scheme, demand continues to outstrip supply.

Support for Governors

93. The LEA provides very good support to governors. Without exception, governors in both primary and secondary schools rated this support very highly. A significant feature of the LEA's success is the way in which it has enabled governors to function as critical friends to schools, whilst at the same time holding them to account in line with their strategic responsibilities. In schools visited it was clear that this good balance of support and challenge has come about as a result of the LEA's support.

94. Most governors know what information should be available to them, when, and in what form; they are well equipped to ask appropriate and challenging questions about it. Although chairs of governors do not receive written visit reports from attached advisers as a matter of routine, this will be rectified as the LEA introduces a yearly summary report. Termly meetings of chairs of governing bodies with the director of education and the chair of the education committee are considered invaluable in providing governors with direct access to policy-makers.

95. Training and support for governors is very well co-ordinated through a very responsive and proactive governor services team. Training needs are thoroughly identified, and link governors meet termly with governor services to plan and review training and to share good practice. Centrally offered courses, school-based training and an annual conference are well attended and very highly rated. Performance management training was cited as particularly excellent. A BTEC Advanced

Certificate in School Governance is part-funded by the LEA and participants rate this course very highly. Governors were almost unanimous in their praise of the excellent support from advisers for the appointment of headteachers.

96. The quality of information and support provided to governing bodies is very good. A helpdesk service is available to both governors and clerks and is outstanding in the quality and efficiency of response to queries and difficulties. Summaries of new legislation are excellent in coverage and clarity and a termly newsletter is highly informative. An annual cycle of governing body activity is particularly helpful in assisting governing bodies with their responsibilities. The LEA is proactive and successful in recruiting governors and the number of vacancies is very low. Newly appointed governors receive a very useful information and development pack and good introductory training. The LEA is very effective in maintaining a high level of training and support for clerks.

Support for early years

97. The support for education in the early years is a strength of the LEA and is afforded a high priority by elected members. The very effective early years partnership successfully brings together 45 providers in the private, voluntary and independent sectors. This effective collaboration, facilitated by the LEA, is a major factor in establishing a good system of communication both centrally and at school level.

98. Strategic planning is very good and the EYDCP has been fully accepted by the DfES each year without any conditions. The EDP contains a number of references to early years that are well integrated into priorities and activities.

99. Provision across the borough for 0-3 year olds is generally sufficient. Priority has appropriately been given to children in deprived areas and there are plans to extend provision further. Less than six per cent of provision for three-year-olds is in the maintained sector, but all providers have full access to the wide range of LEA support services. Part-time nursery provision is available to all four-year-olds and, since September 2000, to increasing numbers of three-year-olds.

100. LEA support for the early years curriculum is of very high quality. Staff report that training has been very good including for the Foundation stage and for baseline assessment. In-school advisory support is also highly valued and there is a very good nursery network which is well supported by the LEA. The nursery conference, attended by 250 people forming the full spectrum of providers, was very useful and much appreciated. The very good quality of the children's information service has also been officially recognised.

101. Strategies for early intervention are being developed, supported by baseline analysis and assessment. The LEA supports pre-school children who have special educational needs through the pre-school support teaching service and the educational psychology service as well as through cross-agency work with health, social services and the voluntary sector. It is participating in the Early Bird initiative for early intervention and support to parents with children on the autistic spectrum. Schools' expectations have been raised, but are not always being met. Three out of

the seven schools visited where early years was a focus perceived there to be insufficient specialist support.

Support for post 16 education

102. Support for post-16 education is satisfactory, but the impact of advice and training has led to little action by schools. In line with the EDP, and through a post-16 steering group and heads of sixth forms, the LEA has provided schools with good information on post-16 courses and pathways. However, student and parental preferences have been significant contributory factors in the slow uptake of vocational options.

103. In encouraging retention post-16, schools' sixth form entry policies have resulted in inappropriate course provision, in that some students following advanced level courses do not achieve well enough, despite the good quality teaching identified through OFSTED inspections. The average points score for pupils following advanced level courses has fallen since 1998, and in 2000 was below the national average. The advanced GNVQ point score has also fallen, but has remained in line with the national figure. The LEA produces value-added data which enables the tracking of individual student performance from Key Stage 4; this information was well used by senior officers when visiting all schools to determine improvements.

104. There are sixth forms in all six secondary schools. Student numbers range from 45 to 192; the LEA recognises that these numbers prevent viable curriculum choice, are not cost effective and cannot continue. A review of post-16 education was completed during Autumn 2000, and the LEA is currently consulting widely on proposals for the development of a strategic plan for post-16 provision. This is well focused on raising achievement through provision in line with individual need, and on ensuring viability and cost-effectiveness. There is a strong emphasis on the strategic marketing of post-16 education, and on collaborative and complementary arrangements between schools and the local FE college. Although discussions between schools and the college and schools themselves are very recent, the LEA has done a good deal to stimulate this process and is rightly optimistic about the prospects for improved partnerships.

Recommendations

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

- consult with schools, and agree a strategy which reduces the amount of centrally funded visiting to effective schools, and which provides an opportunity for schools to buy into additional support to promote their own development.

To improve support for post-16 education:

- rationalise provision in line with the proposals in the post-16 strategic plan, and ensure that student numbers in schools are cost effective and allow for viable curriculum choice.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate Planning

105. Corporate planning for education is of exemplary quality. The plans inspected were clear, readable and well produced, coherent in themselves and in their relationship to each other. There is remarkable consistency through a hierarchy of planning which proceeds from the Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP), through departmental and service plans, to the setting of individual targets. This planning provides both a series of working documents and an excellent framework for performance management. So far as the latter is concerned, in education at least, it is well supported by line-management and training arrangements to ensure consistency of performance at a high level.

106. The thread of principle and aspiration that gives unity to the planning is provided by the council's six medium term objectives:

- improving attainment and learning;
- improving health and well-being;
- enhancing community safety;
- developing the local economy;
- promoting and enhancing the environment; and
- securing Best Value and Improving Service Standards.

107. These are at the heart of the BVPP, which at the moment stands as the overarching plan, since the council has not yet formulated a community plan. The implications of the medium term objectives for each department and service, and ultimately each individual, are made clear through very detailed cross-referencing. Often, the contribution of particular services is self-evident. For example, education contributes to community safety through reducing levels of non-attendance at schools. This is significant in enabling individuals to see the value of their work for the council's broad ambitions.

108. Particularly within education, consultation over plans is a clear strength, and the implementation of plans is kept on track by regular and detailed monitoring and evaluation. Within education, the main vehicle for evaluation and performance review is the quarterly operations report to committee produced by the director. This is a detailed, hard-edged scrutiny which is highly effective in ensuring not only that deadlines are kept, but that the original intentions of plans do not inadvertently slip in the course of implementation.

109. Expenditure is particularly high on strategic management, but the council is committed to offering itself to local public scrutiny through its extensive and increasing use of ICT as a means of inviting comment. It also undertakes major consultation surveys, studies and analyses, comparing its own performance with that of other high-performing councils, consults a residents' panel, is developing a 'challenge checklist' and, perhaps inevitably given its size, demonstrates reasonable objectivity as to choice of providers. It also invited an inspection by the local government improvement programme.

110. The commitment to public scrutiny gave rise to a programme of Best Value Reviews that was, for a small council, too onerous and unlikely to lead to improvement commensurate with the effort invested. That programme has now been extensively rationalised – in itself an example of the council's capacity to learn from self-evaluation. Overall, the council has been successful in creating an ethos of openness, honesty and rigorous scrutiny.

111. Decisions, including financial decisions, are made in much the same spirit. Typically, proposals receive wide consultation and extensive professional and political scrutiny before they reach committee. When they go to committee, they do so accompanied by reports of excellent quality, which put an agreed case for the proposal, based on extensive and compelling analysis.

112. So far as education is concerned, elected members provide good leadership. They are highly committed to, and knowledgeable about, education. They insist on the primacy of high standards, set a clear strategy and are well able to hold officers to account. Cross-party working is good. Members are also well informed by the reports and advice they receive. For example, the quarterly operations reports are a model of their kind. They supply the political authorities with all the evidence they could possibly need to evaluate progress against the medium term objectives. At the same time, the separate roles of members and officers are clearly defined by a strictly adhered to protocol.

113. The director of education and his senior colleagues provide excellent leadership to the service overall. They have achieved a profitable and clearly defined relationship with schools, by whom they are rightly trusted. They set a vision and principles for the service, and have quickly established high professional standards. The role of the director has been crucial. He sets for the entire LEA a tone of informality and approachability, combined with intellectual and professional authority of a high order. The clarity and insight of his leadership are matched by the same qualities in others in the management team.

114. Cross-departmental working with Social Services has been a weakness. Efforts at improvement are being made, led by education, but liaison is difficult, partly owing to the many vacancies in Social Services. The director of education recognises improved working as crucial and has already begun to establish key links through cross-service planning. The joint advisory sub-committee of the council on children's services was a structural device intended to secure co-ordinated working. Schools' experience suggests that in practice it is not succeeding in doing so, but the recent change in status has the potential to remedy this. Current work with children's services, led by the director of education, on the construction of a risk matrix based on common data is an excellent strategy for establishing the roles and functions of support teams. There are effective partnerships with other agencies, notably with the police, the education business partnership, the particularly successful early years partnership, and other LEAs. Relationships with the dioceses are good and effective.

Management services

115. The council provides good management services to schools but has had little impact in encouraging schools to become more self-sufficient in the procurement of

services. The planned Best Value Review of services to schools offers the opportunity to review LEA strategy in this area. The LEA provides a range of services detailed in its comprehensive services to schools brochure, but the basis for charging is unclear. Schools value most of the services and take up is very high. The responsiveness and expertise of the staff were particularly praised by schools but the very small teams are under considerable pressure of work. Financial support, support for ICT in administration, and personnel are good. Payroll, cleaning, grounds maintenance and catering have been poor in the past; nevertheless school visits showed they have improved recently as a result of strengthened client management by the education department and they are now satisfactory. The weaker services are all provided through contracts with external organisations or with other council departments.

116. Although the amounts delegated for the different services are realistic and generally allocated on the basis of need, the charges for most services are equal to the amount delegated, obscuring the link between use of a service and its cost. Most schools visited were unwilling to support any additional delegation and few had considered seeking alternative service providers. The small size of the LEA means that most services would be under threat if even small numbers of schools purchased elsewhere, and schools are well aware of this. The LEA has tried to encourage more independence through its advice on tendering but with limited success. Bracknell Forest is strongly customer-focused and has excellent mechanisms for canvassing schools' views of services through regular headteacher and bursars' meetings, the Fair Funding consultation and a detailed annual survey of schools. It has responded effectively to schools' concerns.

117. **Financial services:** financial advice and monitoring by the LEA are good. The LEA does not offer a bursar service although all schools buy back its cash and banking service. Most schools employ their own bursar and have developed good budget management skills. There is a useful finance manual. The education finance team has a very detailed knowledge of schools through its regular meetings with headteachers and bursars. It monitors school expenditure termly, takes good account of internal audit reports and gives good, proactive advice to schools. The school profiles provided annually to each school include helpful comparative benchmarking of expenditure using Audit Commission categories.

118. Schools are very well informed about the budget-setting process and budget information is both clear and timely. In the school survey, schools rated the LEA highly in relation to support on the planning and control of the school budget, the accuracy of financial information systems, the arrangements for schools to make financial transactions, and arrangements for schools with deficit budgets. Schools facing potential deficits reported useful advice from the group accountant and all had appropriate recovery plans.

119. **Personnel services:** personnel support for schools is good. The small team offers a service level agreement covering training and personnel administration which is bought back by all schools while casework support is provided from central budgets. A good, practically-oriented personnel handbook is in draft form and there is monthly sickness monitoring. Relationships with the unions are good. Casework support is effectively focused on school improvement and priority is given to

supporting schools causing concern or facing budget difficulties, and to the appointment of headteachers.

120. Schools visited reported that personnel support was responsive, efficient and helpful and they valued the model policies and guidance provided. They rated the service between satisfactory and good in the school survey.

121. **Payroll:** the service was poor until recently but it has improved and is now satisfactory. Payroll processing is outsourced to an external provider with a small central finance team providing client support to schools. All schools buy into the payroll service level agreement. During the current financial year, the LEA has carried out considerable work with the provider in response to schools' concerns about the high level of errors. The contract has been re-negotiated to include penalty clauses for errors, links with the finance systems have been improved and an LEA help-line has been set up with detailed logging of queries. Errors made by schools are also followed up.

122. In the school survey payroll was rated in the bottom 25 per cent of LEAs, between satisfactory and poor. However, the schools visited were unanimous in reporting reductions in errors in 2001 and were clear that the problems lay with the provider, not the LEA team, who are very helpful and responsive.

123. **Premises support:** Provision for a helpdesk which gives schools access to a reactive maintenance service to cover primarily emergency work in schools, approved suppliers for other works and a building advice surgery is sound. The reactive maintenance service level agreement requires schools to pool their payments and the service is provided by a one year contract with an external contractor to maximise economies of scale. The quality of work and the condition of buildings are effectively monitored as part of the asset management planning process by borough surveyors. The budget is reviewed annually and adjusted according to demand.

124. Schools are clear about their premises responsibilities and those visited were in reasonable condition and had appropriate rolling maintenance programmes in place. The majority of schools buy into the reactive maintenance service and schools rated building maintenance in the top 25 per cent (between satisfactory and good) in the school survey. Schools reported the arrangements were fair and the service is responsive and of reasonable quality.

125. **ICT:** support for ICT in administration is good. There is a clear LEA strategy for ICT based on a common and up to date platform in all schools. All schools have fast internet links and are able to exchange some information with the LEA electronically. Closer integration of school and LEA management information systems is under development. The LEA is currently introducing a new Windows-based finance system into all schools after a pilot last year and the training has been effectively timed to link with budget planning.

126. Support and advice is provided by a small but expert LEA team and purchased by all schools, while training is charged for separately. An IT helpdesk provided by corporate IT effectively directs calls to the appropriate team member.

There is a useful ICT newsletter for schools. The schools visited were universally positive about the responsiveness of the support they received and in the school survey schools rated all aspects of Bracknell Forest's ICT strategy and support as good, putting it in the top 25 per cent of LEAs.

127. **Catering:** the provision of school meals is satisfactory, although the service provided by an external contractor is funded at a low level and has had difficulty recruiting staff, leading to a decline in the quality of school meals. School meals funding is delegated to secondary schools, two-thirds of which buy into the LEA contract but primary schools oppose delegation. In the school survey catering was rated between satisfactory and poor, in the bottom 25 per cent and lower than in all other LEAs surveyed, although most of the schools visited reported meals were at least satisfactory. The education department has developed its client role in response to the negative views of schools and decisive action was taken to strengthen the monitoring of the service, which is now satisfactory. The contract is currently being re-tendered and the LEA has rightly involved headteacher representatives in the process.

128. **Grounds Maintenance:** this service, provided by Bracknell Forest borough council's environmental services department, is improving from an unsatisfactory start, and is now satisfactory. Most schools buy the service at some level. Until recently the service was not sufficiently customer-focused: invoicing was not clear and scheduled work was not carried out. The education department has rightly strengthened its client role through monitoring and meeting with the service manager and this has effected improvement. In the school survey the service was rated between satisfactory and poor, among the bottom 25 per cent of LEAs. Schools visited were evenly divided as to whether the service was satisfactory with most reporting the actual maintenance work to be good with the problems emanating from the service management. About half the schools felt the service had improved.

129. **Cleaning:** The cleaning service is satisfactory overall but problems retaining staff have led to some deterioration both in the contracted service and in schools which employ their own cleaners. The LEA service is provided by an external contractor to fewer than half of Bracknell Forest's schools. The education department recently took appropriate action to improve monitoring of the service through providing forms for schools to report problems and regular site visits by supervisors. Although schools rated the service between satisfactory and poor in the schools' survey, not all bought the LEA service. Most schools visited judged the LEA service to be satisfactory.

Recommendations:

In order to develop cross-departmental working with Social Services:

- use the common data matrix currently being developed by the cross-departmental group led by the director of education as a model structure for improving operational working.

In order to develop schools' capacity to procure services:

- provide clearer information on the basis for charging in the services to schools handbook.

- **use the Best Value Review of support services to:**
 - determine whether the LEA should offer the current wide range of services; and
 - provide information on other providers if no LEA service is offered.

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION

Strategy

130. The LEA has a good policy and strategy for SEN, and the quality of the arrangements for pupils is a strength of the LEA. A clear and well-considered policy statement, produced from a comprehensive and thorough review of provision when the authority was first established in 1998, is well aligned to central government guidance. It promotes the increasing inclusion of pupils with statements of SEN in a carefully considered manner while providing the necessary support to pupils and schools. Significant in the LEA's plans for raising standards achieved by pupils with SEN is an entitlement to a broad and high quality curriculum, carefully targeted support based on rigorous pupil assessment, the delegation of resources for prevention and early intervention, and a continuum of provision to meet pupils' varying needs. The roles and responsibilities of the LEA, schools and governing bodies in achieving these principles are clearly defined. Consultation has been very effective, and visits to schools indicate widespread understanding of, and very strong support for, the LEA's policy.

131. The SEN strategy effectively guides the implementation of the LEA's policy. Actions are appropriate, timescales are clear and performance targets have been established. Members and schools are well informed of progress against policy commitments through the SEN task group, comprising schools, support services and officers, and the members' focus group. Significant progress has been made in the provision of information to schools and parents; developing partnerships; conciliation arrangements; the setting-up of the pupil referral service and developing the role of the LEA's only special school as a centre of excellence. The special education policy and the EDP are interrelated, and the EDP details a range of good and well monitored actions with clear outcomes and targets.

132. The LEA is committed to reducing the number of out of borough placements for pupils with special educational needs and has made very good progress with its inclusion strategy for pupils with learning, sensory and physical disabilities. However, although the strategy for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) is appropriate, provision is overall unsatisfactory. The borough maintains resourced units attached to three mainstream primary schools and one secondary school. Three of these have been established for some time and provide good support for pupils with speech and language difficulties, moderate learning difficulties and specific learning difficulties, from specialist teachers within a mainstream setting. The fourth unit, attached to an infant's school, has been recently established to support pupils with social and communication difficulties, with the aim of early reintegration into the pupil's local school. Although delegated funding for non-statemented pupils with SEN is below the national average, schools visited reported that funding, and the allocation of specialist resources, enabled pupils to receive appropriate support in line with LEA policy. The placement of pupils with statements of SEN in both mainstream primary and secondary schools is above the national figure, demonstrating the LEA's success with increased inclusion. In January 2000 the figure for primary schools was 71.7 per cent, compared with a national figure of 61.8 per cent. In secondary schools this figure was 69.4 per cent, compared with 61.2 per cent nationally.

Statutory obligations

133. The LEA is effective in meeting its statutory obligations in regard to pupils with SEN in accordance with the SEN Code of Practice. The LEA has clear criteria for the statutory assessment process and good training has been provided for schools and governors. All statutory assessments are completed within the 18 week timescale, compared to 64 per cent in 1998. However, the needs of a small number of pupils with EBD are not adequately met as the LEA has been unable to find a suitable placement.

134. The arrangements for multi-professional assessments and the issuing of Statements of SEN are very effective and the procedures are completed within target timescales. The quality of statements and individual education plans is good, and annual reviews are conducted appropriately. A review of a sample of casefiles showed these to be effectively organised and maintained and there was evidence of high quality casework and sensitive handling of potentially difficult cases, with very good work with parents. There is effective support to parents through the Parent Partnership. A group of parents spoke in very positive terms about the way in which their children's cases had been dealt with by the LEA. They considered that the LEA is fully accommodating of parental concerns and is effective and efficient in making provision for their children's needs, in an appropriate setting.

Improvement and value for money

135. Overall, support for school improvement is good. In 16 out of the 17 schools visited during the inspection, support for SEN was judged to be mostly good.

136. Guidance to schools and SEN governors on the identification and assessment of pupils with SEN is very clear and comprehensive. This is well used, and all schools found this information particularly helpful and supportive to effective work by SEN co-ordinators (SENCOs). Training for the early identification of learning difficulties and in formulating Individual Education Plans has been effective, and primary schools report an increased level of confidence as a result. Regular meetings for SENCOs are very well attended and highly rated, especially as an opportunity for special school and mainstream teachers to share concerns and practice. Plans to share effective practice through the identification of leading teachers and to develop multi-agency working are well targeted.

137. A team of three educational psychologists (EPs), which is small in relation to similar sized LEAs, is effectively managed by the principal educational psychologist. Time allocations to schools are appropriately formula based, reflecting different needs. With such a small team, members are under considerable pressure and much of their time is spent on statutory work with limited opportunities for early intervention. The good quality of the work of the educational psychologists contributes to the effective completion of statutory assessment procedures within the target timescales. The pressures on the team have been recognised and members have agreed to the establishment of an additional post, but this has not yet been filled.

138. There is effective monitoring of the impact of provision for pupils with SEN and pupils' progress is generally good. The adviser for SEN provides good support to schools, which is further supported by attached advisers who are knowledgeable and offer good advice. The support to pupils with SEN provided by the LEA centrally-funded teams is well respected in schools and regarded as making a significant contribution to pupils' progress. There is very effective support to pupils with sensory impairment, provided through the service run by a neighbouring LEA for a consortium of LEAs. A small number of action research projects have been established to raise the achievement of pupils with SEN, for which there are effective arrangements for external evaluation. However, there are delays in the speed of response from the Health Authority, and weaknesses in the provision for speech and language therapy.

139. One of the major challenges facing the LEA is the high and growing cost of placements in non-LEA maintained special schools. This has hampered a more creative use of the SEN budget. Year on year analysis of trends in statementing show the most significant change is the increase in non-LEA special school placements for pupils with EBD and Asperger Syndrome. Currently, 27 pupils are expensively provided for outside the borough. Although placement in the PRUs is an appropriate short term strategy for pupils awaiting placements in special schools, a lack of available places means that four EBD pupils have been so placed for in excess of one year. The LEA is currently undertaking a comprehensive Best Value Review of provision for pupils with SEN. A draft interim report was made available to the inspection team. It presents a very detailed examination of current expenditure and considers a sensible range of options for improvement, including developing a range of provision within the LEA, particularly for pupils with autism and EBD.

140. Expenditure on SEN is slightly above average for similar LEAs and the national average. Given the current expenditure on out of borough placements, this budget is difficult to control and is exceeded. A high level of expenditure on home to school transport also reflects the lack of special school provision within the borough. Both budgets, however, are rigorously monitored. Provision for pupils with SEN is good and they make good progress, but provision for the small number pupils with EBD who have been waiting for too long for appropriate placements in special schools is unsatisfactory. On balance, value for money is satisfactory.

Recommendations

In order to improve provision for pupils with Special Educational Needs:

- increase EBD provision within the LEA rather than relying so heavily on provision in other authorities; and
- work with the Health Authority to improve the speed of response, and weaknesses in the provision of speech and language therapy.

SECTION 5: ACCESS

The Supply of School Places

141. Planning of school places in Bracknell Forest is satisfactory, with areas of significant strength. There are currently surplus places in some schools but the borough population is increasing steeply due to new housing developments, and demand is higher than capacity in other areas. Surplus places in both primary and secondary schools are above the national average. In January 2000, there were six primary schools and one secondary school with more than 25 per cent surplus places. Bracknell Forest's population is projected to increase by 23 per cent between 1999 and 2021 due to new building. However, current LEA forecasts predict that secondary rolls will increase by 6.8 per cent by 2005, while primary numbers will decrease by 5 per cent. The LEA forecasts are generally reasonably accurate but underestimate numbers in aided schools and the number of children to be expected from new housing in the north of the borough. The LEA is rightly leading research with the other ex-Berkshire unitary authorities to improve the estimation of the population from new housing since this is key to effective planning.

142. Bracknell Forest's school organisation plan is clear, detailed and well linked to other plans and procedures such as the asset management plan (AMP) and admissions. Schools are well consulted on the plan and links with the dioceses and neighbouring authorities are good. The LEA builds new schools where there is a new development and is successful in obtaining contributions from developers. However, this community school policy means that primary schools with designated areas including little new development, mainly to the south of the town centre, may continue to experience falling rolls. The LEA has effectively reduced the capacity of some undersubscribed primary schools through the infant class size initiative, alternative use of accommodation and suitability-linked internal reorganisation. It expects two planned housing developments (one including a new primary school) to generate further increases in demand.

143. The school organisation committee has been set up as required and has met four times. The class size plan will be fully implemented by September 2001, although the standard numbers for some schools make class organisation difficult.

Asset management planning

144. Asset management planning in Bracknell Forest is good despite a legacy of under-investment in school buildings. The LEA has successfully met DfES deadlines for suitability surveys and was graded as satisfactory overall in the DfES appraisal process. Condition and suitability information is complete and all schools have copies of their surveys in a useful and accessible form. Council surveyors update these annually. The asset management plan is reviewed annually in consultation with schools and with the headteacher and governor representatives on the AMP working group.

145. The authority has good planned maintenance arrangements in place and covers all category 1 and most category 2 need each year, owing to a relatively generous capital programme and success in bidding for New Deal for Schools

funding. Schools visited were clear about the priorities in the AMP and are informed each year of the planned maintenance programme (covering capital works of over £5000). The schools also emphasised that the LEA is flexible in trying to take account of their concerns. It will also match fund school projects where possible. Guidance provided to schools and governors about the different sources of premises funding is good. The schools visited were aware that they had responsibility for funding some priority projects out of their devolved capital and the LEA provides useful advice and monitors expenditure. There are major suitability issues arising from the significant number of 1960s primary school buildings with open-plan classrooms, but the LEA has made a good start on re-modelling these.

146. The capital programme in education is well managed with schools being effectively involved in the planning of works on their premises and few projects overrunning once they begin. The council surveyors provide good project management and the schools visited which had had building work were positive about the quality of this.

Admissions

147. Arrangements for admissions to Bracknell Forest schools are satisfactory, although a decision on the age of entry to Reception classes is overdue. Most schools are community schools and primary schools organise their own admissions while the LEA co-ordinates secondary admissions. The good communication between the LEA and schools, dioceses and neighbouring authorities renders an admissions forum unnecessary.

148. The community-based schools and primary-secondary links mean that most parents gain information about their local school through day to day contacts rather than through LEA brochures. The admissions brochures are comprehensive but not sufficiently parent-friendly with complex, densely-written information, no information in minority languages, no maps, and poorly-presented information on numbers of applicants. The criteria for admission to schools are subject to annual consultation, and have not been changed since Bracknell Forest took over from Berkshire. They are primarily based on residence in the school's designated area, followed by sibling links and medical or social reasons. There have been no complaints or challenges to the admissions adjudicator.

149. Admissions to primary reception classes take place in the term after the child's fifth birthday, with part-time nursery provision available to all four year olds and, since September 2000, to increasing numbers of three year olds. Schools may choose to admit rising five pupils to reception if they have the funds and the capacity, and many do so. An extensive consultation conducted in the Autumn term 2000, indicated that most schools would prefer September entry for all pupils. The LEA is reviewing this, but opposing views from the consultation, together with the additional resources needed, have not yet enabled a decision to be made. A group of members and officers is currently considering the options. Some primary schools visited reported difficulties recruiting reception teachers on short-term contracts and were rightly critical of the LEA's apparent indecision in this area.

150. Ninety-five per cent of first preferences are met at secondary transfer. There is a common secondary admissions timetable and application form with the ex-Berkshire LEAs organised through the useful inter-unitary planning group. There are relatively few appeals, all of which are dealt with in a timely manner.

Provision of education otherwise than at school

151. The provision for individual pupils with no school place is poor and in a very few instances the LEA has failed to meet its statutory duties. The major weaknesses are a lack of clear strategic planning, a pro-exclusion climate and low reintegration rates in schools which means demand on the small pupil referral service (PRS) continues to outstrip places available. For pupils out of school and not at the PRU provision is often inadequate to meet their needs. The LEA maintains very good data on pupils educated otherwise than at school, but does not analyse this sufficiently well.

152. The LEA has made substantial progress in the last eighteen months in moving away from a position where all pupils with no school place received only four hours tuition by home tutors. Both the primary and secondary PRUs have been inspected by OFSTED. These clearly demonstrated the high level of care and commitment shown by staff and the good quality of teaching. The issues for these pupils are the length of time out of school and how the provision will be increased to full time.

153. In May 2001, there were 27 permanently excluded pupils without a school place. The two primary pupils were allocated four hours of one-to-one home tuition, which is unsatisfactory. The others are all secondary pupils who have an alternative placement at the secondary PRU. Of these, 13 receive 12.5 hours tuition and the others receive between four and ten hours; this is also inadequate. Three Year 11 pupils have additional time at a college of further education.

154. The secondary PRU has accommodation for 15 fte pupils. Currently it has 28 pupils on roll and five on the waiting list. A further 12 pupils are taught on another site, in unsuitable accommodation; it is not registered as a PRU and is therefore not liable to inspection, which is unsatisfactory. Serious staffing difficulties meant that one group of these vulnerable pupils received no education for a term and the LEA did not meet its statutory duties. Pupils on the waiting list for the PRU receive four hours of one-to-one tuition or, if at risk of exclusion, remain in their schools.

155. There are clear admission and exit criteria for the PRU. For the secondary PRU a shortage of places for EBD pupils leads to anomalies, because pupils are placed in the PRU for excessive periods of time.

156. All Key Stage 4 pupils follow accredited courses and are offered transition programmes leading to further education. This works well and provision is at least sound. Reintegration is a major challenge for a small LEA with only six secondary schools. Reintegration rates into mainstream schools are very low and have declined dramatically at secondary level since the setting up of the PRU; only one pupil has been reintegrated into another secondary school since the unit was set up. Others have been placed into special schools. A concern is the growing number of referrals from Key Stage 3. The LEA has, since 1998, identified the length of time to

secure an alternative school place as a performance indicator, but it has not featured in evaluations. On 1 May, 12 pupils had been out of school for more than one year and this is unsatisfactory.

157. The primary PRU provides part-time attendance for mornings or afternoons. There are 16 pupils on roll and three on the waiting list. Pupils awaiting placement continue to attend their mainstream school.

158. The home teaching service works with pupils on a one-to-one basis who are offered four hours teaching per week. This support is provided mainly for eight pupils absent through illness and five who have a school phobia, but has supported as many as eight EBD pupils awaiting a placement. Consequently the number of home tutors has not decreased, despite the establishment of the PRUs.

159. There are 21 pupils whose parents have elected to remove them from schools. The LEA monitoring of this provision is satisfactory.

160. A report by consultants in November 2000 concluded that the LEA has no clear strategy for providing full-time provision by 2002. As yet, there is no reintegration policy and no timetabled plan shared with schools and other partners.

Attendance

161. Support for attendance is sound generally, with more strengths than weaknesses. Attendance was above 90 per cent in all primary schools and two thirds of secondary schools in 1999/00. Unauthorised absences are below the national average in primary schools. In secondary schools, unauthorised absence is broadly in line with the national average, but at 0.9 per cent this exceeds the LEA's EDP target of 0.6 per cent.

162. The LEA is taking appropriate steps to target resources at schools in greatest need, but has not been sufficiently rigorous in its challenge to those schools. It has improved the identification of needs through cluster arrangements and each school has an allocated education welfare officer (EWO). The LEA has supported secondary schools and most primary schools in the acquisition and use of computerised monitoring systems for attendance. Schools value this and it is leading to improved analysis for patterns of absence. However, the LEA has not negotiated targets for improvement in all schools or provided feedback on the effectiveness of strategies used within individual schools. Actions to extend the involvement of industry, for example an innovative mentoring programme managed through a very strong Education Business Partnership (EBP), has raised pupil aspirations and resulted in a dramatic rise in attendance for those pupils.

163. The education welfare service (EWS) is small, and satisfactorily managed. It has been a stable team and, although it is not well qualified through formal qualifications, there is regular training and a robust appraisal system is in place. A school attendance manual has recently been updated and circulated to schools. It includes general guidance on routine matters and examples of good practice. The criteria for referrals to the EWS are clear, and the work of individual EWOs is valued by schools.

164. Liaison with the police is good. There has been collaboration for low level truancy patrols, but these are recognised as being limited and ways of targeting persistent offenders more effectively are being considered. The police also contribute to ceremonies acknowledging 100 per cent attendance records by pupils.

Support for behaviour

165. Support for behaviour is unsatisfactory. The LEA's involvement in the exclusion process; training and support for governor's disciplinary committees; provision and guidance to schools, and the work of the secondary school social inclusion group, has been successful in reducing the number of permanent exclusions, but the number of fixed term exclusions has risen sharply.

166. The total number of permanent exclusions rose from 37 in 1997/8 to 52 in 1998/9 and then fell sharply to 29 in 1999/2000. This was a significant achievement and met the EDP target. The fall in permanent exclusions has been accompanied by a sharp rise in fixed term exclusions in the last two years; 233 fixed term exclusions in Autumn 2000 is a 156 per cent rise on the figure of 91 in Autumn 1997, under the previous authority.

167. The behaviour support plan (BSP) starts well with a thorough analysis of the LEA context but has insufficient explicit targets to address the issue it identifies. The plan is clear about intentions to support mainstream and inclusion but lacks detail. The revised BSP in April 2001 does not assess or review the effectiveness of original strategies or outline alternatives, although a significant project has been appropriately located in one secondary school. A recent external audit study concluded that the LEA had done little work on the cost and efficiency of the support services and this remains true.

168. The schools value highly the work of the small behaviour support team (BST). It was set up to support secondary schools but now works predominately in the primary phase; it is very stretched to meet the demand. A particularly successful initiative, supported by the BST, has been the peer mediation work at one primary school. There has also been individual good work by EWOs and EPs and by the youth offending team for anger management. Good links with the police means they have training for teachers in a few schools on restorative justice techniques. In secondary schools, one school experimented with an in-school inclusion unit, but it was unsuccessful and another strategy is being tried. Two other schools are about to establish such units with the support of the LEA. However, this does not amount to a coherent continuum of support. In particular, there is insufficient support for training and supporting teachers in dealing with very challenging behaviour. Despite LEA encouragement, there has been little progress in secondary schools in providing alternative curricula for disaffected pupils.

169. The PRU is not able to carry out preventative work in schools although that is one of its expressed aims. This arises because of severe staffing difficulties in the past and the high number of referrals for out of school provision. Since there is a waiting list for the PRU, this situation seems set to continue for the foreseeable future.

170. Exclusions are comprehensively monitored. The LEA has analysed the reasons for both fixed term and permanent exclusions on a school by school basis and has shared this information with secondary schools; a more recent analysis further refines this data. A strength is that it enables the LEA to identify issues. For instance, in 1999/2000 there were 420 fixed term exclusions from the six secondary schools and of these 60 per cent involved defiance or verbal abuse of staff. A weakness is that the LEA has not analysed times spent out of school by EBD or other pupils. This means that useful management information on behaviour strategies and use of PRUs is being missed and inadequate analysis presented to members.

Health, safety, welfare, child protection

171. Support for health and safety is very good, and the LEA provides good support for child protection.

172. A council team, augmented in Autumn 2000 as a result of education department concerns, offers good advice to schools. Advisers have carried out an excellent audit for each school and provided good written reports, which are well monitored by the LEA. The quality of health and safety training is usually good, but that delivered by the corporate centre is not always sufficiently school specific.

173. The LEA provides schools with clear information and guidance in meeting its responsibilities for safeguarding the health, safety and welfare of pupils. A Healthy Schools initiative has been running for two years and 24 schools are actively engaged in this. Guidance and training on child protection procedures is good and well regarded by schools. The LEA maintains an up-to-date list of designated teachers.

Support for children in public care

174. LEA support for children in public care has strengths but also significant weaknesses. There are approximately 50 school-age children in the care of the Local Authority, and the LEA has good systems for monitoring attainment, attendance and exclusions.

175. The joint review of Social Services in February 2001 was critical of the weak strategic leadership, experience and expertise of elected members in this area. Liaison between Social Services and other departments including education was also identified as an area of concern. This is confirmed by school visits where seven schools still cite examples of unsatisfactory and poor co-ordination. 'Quality Protects' management action plan year 3, indicates the need for a stronger 'corporate parent' role for members. The council is giving these issues a high priority and co-ordination between education and Social Services is now improving. Guidelines on procedures for children in public care have recently been produced. These identify a list of actions which the council, through the joint advisory sub-committee will take. A positive step has been the implementation of joint training for social workers and for designated teachers in all schools.

Ethnic minority children including Travellers

176. The support for ethnic minority pupils has strengths but also significant weaknesses.

177. Support for English as an additional language (EAL) is commissioned from Reading LEA. It is effective and represents sound value for money. There are satisfactory arrangements for central monitoring and co-ordination of work. A weakness is that EAL work is done in isolation from other initiatives in the LEA. In particular, attainment data on ethnic minority achievement used by attached advisers in discussions with schools, is not shared; there is no clear strategy to improve the expertise of teachers in schools, and links with numeracy and literacy consultants are only just being established. This is reflected in the relatively low rating given to support for ethnic minorities in surveys of schools.

178. The LEA has a very low proportion of pupils of ethnic minority heritage and it monitors thoroughly the attainment, attendance and levels of exclusion of ethnic minority pupils. Such a small but dispersed population presents particular challenges for the LEA. The EDP makes little reference to this group and the ethnic minority/Traveller achievement plan does not articulate a clear policy to overcome these difficulties.

179. The LEA is a partner in the Thames Valley Traveller education consortium, along with the other former Berkshire authorities. In 2000/1, 66 pupils are being supported in 13 schools. Attainment is monitored well and there are good links with an EWO to support attendance. A Traveller liaison group meets twice a year and there are informative annual reports to the director of education.

Support for gifted and talented pupils

180. Support for gifted and talented pupils is unsatisfactory. The first EDP committed the LEA to develop a policy by October 1999, to identify cohorts of pupils in schools by September 2001 and to train teachers in the development and implementation of policies by March 2000. However, there has been very little progress and in the latest EDP all the milestones for action have been extended to March 2002. A working group was set up two years ago, but progress has been slow and there are few tangible outcomes.

181. Owing to ill-health, planning for taking forward this work in collaboration with the 'thinking skills' initiative, has been delayed. The lack of a coherent policy results in a very varied quality of provision in schools. Few schools have identified the target group of pupils, and where they have it is not consistent with the LEA's policy of the top two per cent. A few schools have nominated a designated teacher and drawn up draft policies, but based on guidance from other sources. As the LEA is concerned about the loss of able pupils at the end of Key Stage 2, the lack of action is a cause for concern.

182. There are useful initiatives that could form the basis of a strategy. In September 2000 a successful summer school was mounted with two cohorts of pupils; other pupils have attended after school clubs for able pupils. There are no

specialist schools, but the LEA does provide a range of support that schools can use to enhance talent. These include qualified sports coaches, music tuition and artists in residence.

Combating racism

183. The LEA was initially slow to respond to the Macpherson Report into the death of Stephen Lawrence, but there has been rapid progress in recent months. In January 2001, the policy and guidance for Equality of Opportunity were updated and the council are adopting the Council for Race Equality (CRE) standard. The LEA has also revised existing documentation and provided sound guidance to schools on challenging and monitoring racial harassment. Data on exclusions from schools has now been analysed and is about to be shared with them; there are very few exclusions relating to racism.

184. The recent measures have not yet impacted on schools. Schools record racial incidents as directed by the LEA; this data has not been collected although this is to be remedied in July 2001. A consequence is that members have not been able to monitor effectively and so are not able to assess whether there are areas for concern. The joint review of social services raised concerns about young people at risk including children of ethnic minority origin. A report was commissioned from the local CRE by the council's policy unit to address this issue, but this is behind schedule and therefore unhelpful to the LEA in progressing this work.

185. The new RE syllabus gives more attention to multi-faith issues than before. Also, the council is planning a major training programme on 'managing diversity' for about 250 of its senior managers. Plans to extend this training to schools have yet to be finalised. In schools visited, many headteachers perceive that the council has not taken sufficient initiative on this issue, but few had taken active steps to raise awareness of diverse cultures themselves.

Social exclusion

186. The council has not placed a sufficiently high priority on social inclusion. The joint review identified serious concerns about support for vulnerable children. The Council is addressing those concerns, and a social inclusion task group with representation from all six secondary schools and the pupil referral service is in place. An inclusion audit has identified vulnerable pupils, and useful work has taken place with the police and other key agencies. However, this report identifies that there is still much to be done.

187. The lack of an effective strategy to provide full-time provision for pupils with no school place needs to be remedied urgently. The LEA needs to implement the measures it has identified to combat racism. The LEA has made very good progress with its inclusion strategy for SEN pupils, but there is a lack of shared understanding concerning social inclusion policy and practice.

Recommendations

Improve access to education by:

- articulating a council strategy for social inclusion and ensuring that there is oversight and co-ordination of the LEA's promotion of social inclusion.

Improve support for pupils with no school place by:

- urgently devising and implementing a plan which sets out a clear strategy for providing full-time education by 2002. The plan should include:
 - an analysis of current provision including times taken to find an alternative school placement, the suitability of placements at the secondary PRU and accommodation;
 - timescales for producing a re-integration policy;
 - a schedule for improving provision with estimated staffing and accommodation costs;
 - establishing performance indicators and stating how these will be reported on to senior managers and elected members;
 - details of arrangements for pupils with SEN; and
 - cross-referencing to plans for provision for supporting EBD pupils and to major plans such as the BSP and EDP; and
- strengthen the management steering group so that it provides a better strategic steer to the pupil referral units.

Improve support for attendance by:

- improving planning to detail how schools with the greatest need are identified, supported, monitored, challenged and provided with feedback on the effectiveness of their procedures.

Improve support for pupil behaviour by:

- reviewing the sufficiency and effectiveness of provision and producing a detailed plan which:
 - ensures a better co-ordinated approach to support challenging behaviour;
 - improves the in-school support for pupils at risk of exclusion, including specifying the role, if any, of school-based units and external support from the PRS; and
 - sets targets for reducing fixed term exclusions.
- improving the training available for teachers in handling pupils with behavioural difficulties.

Improve the support for children in public care by:

- improving further the co-ordination between education and Social Services.

Improve support for gifted and talented pupils by:

- implementing the activities outlined in the EDP within a more urgent timescale.

Improve measures to combat racism by:

- improving the support and challenge to schools so that they can confidently tackle multicultural issues and race relations within the curriculum.

Improve support to ethnic minority groups by:

- devising a strategy that better meets the needs of a dispersed ethnic minority population by improving the expertise of schools and sharing attainment data more effectively.

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

In order to support improvement at Key Stage 4:

- strengthen advice and support for alternative approaches to the National Curriculum for disaffected pupils and determine the impact of this support through targeting and challenging individual schools in line with performance, attendance, and exclusion data.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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

- consult with schools, and agree a strategy which reduces the amount of centrally funded visiting to effective schools, and which provides an opportunity for schools to buy into additional support to promote their own development.

To improve support for post-16 education:

- rationalise provision in line with the proposals in the post-16 strategic plan, and ensure that student numbers in schools are cost effective and allow for viable curriculum choice.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

In order to develop cross-departmental working with Social Services:

- use the common data matrix currently being developed by the cross-departmental group led by the director of education as a model structure for improving operational working.

In order to develop schools' capacity to procure services:

- provide clearer information on the basis for charging in the services to schools handbook.
- **use the Best Value Review of support services to:**
 - determine whether the LEA should offer the current wide range of services; and
 - provide information on other providers if no LEA service is offered.

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS PROVISION

In order to improve provision for pupils with Special Educational Needs:

- increase EBD provision within the LEA rather than relying so heavily on provision in other authorities; and
- work with the Health Authority to improve the speed of response, and weaknesses in the provision of speech and language therapy.

SECTION 5: ACCESS

Improve access to education by:

- articulating a council strategy for social inclusion and ensuring that there is oversight and co-ordination of the LEA's promotion of social inclusion.

Improve support for pupils with no school place by:

- urgently devising and implementing a plan which sets out a clear strategy for providing full-time education by 2002. The plan should include:
 - an analysis of current provision including times taken to find an alternative school placement, the suitability of placements at the secondary PRU and accommodation;
 - timescales for producing a re-integration policy;
 - a schedule for improving provision with estimated staffing and accommodation costs;
 - establishing performance indicators and stating how these will be reported on to senior managers and elected members;
 - details of arrangements for pupils with SEN; and
 - cross-referencing to plans for provision for supporting EBD pupils and to major plans such as the BSP and EDP.
- strengthen the management steering group so that it provides a better strategic steer to the pupil referral units.

Improve support for attendance by:

- improving planning to detail how schools with the greatest need are identified, supported, monitored, challenged and provided with feedback on the effectiveness of their procedures.

Improve support for pupil behaviour by:

- reviewing the sufficiency and effectiveness of provision and producing a detailed plan which:
 - ensures a better co-ordinated approach to support challenging behaviour;
 - improves the in-school support for pupils at risk of exclusion, including specifying the role, if any, of school-based units and external support from the PRS; and
 - sets targets for reducing fixed term exclusions.

- improving the training available for teachers in handling pupils with behavioural difficulties.

Improve the support for children in public care by:

- improving further the co-ordination between education and Social Services.

Improve support for gifted and talented pupils by:

- implementing the activities outlined in the EDP within a more urgent timescale.

Improve measures to combat racism by:

- improving the support and challenge to schools so that they can confidently tackle multicultural issues and race relations within the curriculum.

Improve support to ethnic minority groups by:

- devising a strategy that better meets the needs of a dispersed ethnic minority population by improving the expertise of schools and sharing attainment data more effectively.

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