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IN EDUCATION**

**INSPECTION OF
BOLTON
LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

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**OFFICE OF HER MAJESTY'S CHIEF INSPECTOR OF SCHOOLS
in conjunction with the
AUDIT COMMISSION**

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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* July 1999, which focuses on the effectiveness of the local education authority (LEA) work to support school improvement. The inspection also took account of the Local Government Act 1999, insofar as it relates to work undertaken by the LEA on Best Value.
2. The inspection was based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA, on school inspection information, HMI monitoring reports and audit reports, on documentation and discussions with LEA members, focus groups of headteachers, governors, teachers, professional associations, staff in the education department and in other Council departments and representatives of the LEA's partners. Five agencies and LEA partners submitted written evidence of participation and joint working. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on aspects of the LEA's work was circulated to 134 schools. The response rate was 79 per cent.
3. The inspection also involved studies of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to one nursery school, ten primary schools, five secondary schools, and three special schools. A further eight schools were visited as part of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy monitoring. The visits tested the views of governors, headteachers and other staff on the key aspects of the LEA's strategy. The visits also considered whether the support that is provided by the LEA contributes, where appropriate, to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in the school, and provides value for money.

COMMENTARY

4. Bolton Metro serves a population of 266,500 within the Greater Manchester urban conurbation of 2.6 million. Some areas are affluent, others face high levels of deprivation, so schools in the borough face very different challenges. Against most indicators, such as unemployment, ethnicity and eligibility for free school meals, the overall position of the borough is close to the national average.
5. Standards in LEA maintained schools are mainly close to the national average. The rate of improvement in results has reflected the national trend, except for those achieved by 14-year-olds in English and the average points score for 16-year-olds, both of which have been below the national trend. Schools are making good progress between inspections, and secondary schools overall have fewer weaknesses than primary schools.
6. Bolton is a well-run LEA with a consistent level of sound performance across almost all of its functions. It monitors its work well, but the evaluation of the impact of its policies, whilst strong in a few areas, is weaker than this in many. Corporate planning and strategy, including planning for the provision of school places, are strengths. The Council is making strenuous efforts to coordinate activities and initiatives across the borough, targeting its resources at raising educational standards in line with its policies for social inclusion and economic regeneration. Members are closely involved in this strategy, and are well-advised by officers, to whom they delegate high levels of responsibility. The recent change to a cabinet style of leadership is enabling leading members to work closely with officers, and increasingly with schools, to formulate and develop policy.
7. Resources for education are adequate. A previous lack of investment in capital repairs and projects has been rectified in recent years by successful bids and proposals for development. Spending is in line with the Standard Spending Assessment and is augmented in areas of need because of the borough's success in attracting external funding.
8. The LEA discharges almost all of its functions adequately to support school improvement, and many of them well. Particular strengths are found in:
 - support for numeracy in primary schools;
 - support for information and communication technology (ICT) in primary schools; and
 - support and training offered to governors.
9. There are weaknesses, but they are few in number and are outweighed by the overall strengths of the LEA. They lie mainly in:
 - the deployment of staff to support school improvement – too much staff time is dedicated to monitoring the LEA's implementation of the national strategies for school improvement as set out in the education development plan (EDP); and
 - evaluating the effectiveness of the EDP.

10. The LEA has responded dutifully to the changing requirements placed upon LEAs, but did not lead schools energetically into taking greater responsibility for their own improvement. In this respect, it followed rather than led change. However, under the leadership of the highly regarded director of education and arts, the pace of change and development is accelerating. Tough issues have been tackled with resolve; a review of surplus places in primary schools and schools facing difficulties have both been supported and challenged to improve.
11. Relationships with schools are good. The partnership arrangements for consultation and communication with schools are working well and are playing an increasing role in the management of the education service. Most schools have a high level of confidence and trust in the LEA. The strong, school-led, partnership agreements offer a degree of security for many schools and they are content to let the LEA support school improvement with centrally-retained funds. For a few schools this situation leads to frustration as they seek further delegation and higher levels of autonomy. The LEA has recognised this and is piloting schemes for increasing delegation to schools.
12. Two challenges face the education service as the pace and nature of delegation increases. For schools, the challenge lies in accepting that the service available may not match the current level of provision, which is often achieved by advisers and officers working voluntarily beyond the time allocated. The challenge facing the LEA lies in acknowledging that it does not need to have such a high presence in schools in order to know them well. Bolton has sufficient, high quality, performance data on its schools to be able to challenge them in setting targets; indeed it is already doing so. Given the confidence schools have in the LEA and their wish to work closely with advisers and officers, the successful schools, rather than the LEA, should determine the level and nature of the support they receive.
13. Bolton Metro is a responsive and responsible local authority, with few areas of weakness in its educational functions. More importantly, it has made many recent changes, and the rate of improvement, recognised and welcomed by schools, is accelerating. It is well within the compass of the LEA to act on the recommendations in this report in order to take the education service forward.

SECTION ONE: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

14. Bolton Metro serves a population of 266,500; although some areas are affluent, others show very high levels of deprivation, meaning that schools in the borough face very different challenges. Nine wards are in receipt of European Union Objective 2 funding to assist regions seriously affected by industrial decline. In January 2000, unemployment, at 4.6 per cent, was slightly above the national average of 4.3 per cent and the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals was very close to the national average. The proportion of pupils of ethnic minority heritage, at 13.6 per cent, is broadly in line with the national average of 11.7 per cent.
15. The borough offers nursery education provision for all three and four-year-olds in 173 maintained and non-maintained settings, including 48 nursery classes and five nursery schools. Transfer to secondary schools is at age eleven. The LEA maintains 134 schools and units, comprising:

Nursery schools	5
Primary schools (of which 49 are voluntary, 55 community and 1 foundation)	105
Secondary schools (of which 6 are voluntary and 1 foundation) for 11-16 year olds	11
for 11-18 year olds	5
Special schools	6
Pupil Referral Units	2

16. There are 28,931 pupils in nursery and primary schools, 17,080 pupils in secondary schools and 450 pupils in special schools, a total LEA school population of 46,461 pupils. One hundred and thirty seven pupils are educated otherwise than at school and 122 pupils maintained with statements of special educational need (SEN) are educated in special schools in other LEAs, independent schools and non-maintained special schools. The proportion of Bolton pupils educated in special schools, at 1.2 per cent, is below the national average. The LEA maintains statements of SEN for 1.7 per cent of pupils up to 10-years-old and 2.8 per cent of pupils aged 11-19 (2.42 per cent overall against a national average of 2.1 per cent in 1999). These are in line with national figures. The Brightmet and Tonge EAZ was approved by the Secretary of State in the autumn of 1999 and became operational in April 2000.

Performance

17. A detailed analysis of the performance of schools in Bolton has been supplied to the LEA in the form of the LEA statistical profile, from which some of the following information has been extracted:
- Recent OFSTED school inspection reports indicate that in well over a third of schools pupils enter education with poor levels of attainment, and in less

than a quarter they enter with good levels. This is slightly better than similar authorities¹, but less favourable than nationally.

- Results in the 1999 national tests for 7, 11 and 14 year-olds are in line with those achieved in similar authorities and in line with the national average. However, in mathematics for seven-year-olds and English for 14 year olds, they are lower.
- The 1999 GCSE examination results were in line with similar authorities, and the national average, in terms of the percentage of pupils gaining five or more grades A* to C. The percentage gaining grades A* to G was, however, below the national average.
- Since 1997, results in core subjects for seven and 11 year olds, and 14 year olds in mathematics, have reflected the national trend for improvement, whilst results for 14-year-olds in English and for pupils taking GCSE examinations have improved at a lower rate than nationally.
- The percentage of primary schools judged to be good or very good by OFSTED inspections is in line with similar authorities but lower than nationally. The rate of progress made by primary schools between inspections is in line with or greater than the national figures.
- The percentage of secondary schools judged to be good or very good is higher than that found in similar authorities and nationally. Schools are also making good progress between inspections, better than the national rate of improvement.
- The quality of teaching in recent inspections in primary schools was judged to be very similar to the national average and had improved at a similar rate. In secondary schools it was better than the national average.
- The rate of permanent exclusions in both primary and secondary schools was in line with the national rate in 1999.
- Attendance in primary schools was in line with the national average in 1999, as was the rate of unauthorised absences. Attendance in secondary schools was broadly in line with national figures, although the rate of unauthorised absences was higher than the national figure.

Funding

18. The Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) funding allocation per pupil is slightly lower than the average for metropolitan authorities. In 1995/96, the Council was spending six per cent above the education SSA, but in the last two years spending has been at the SSA level. The LEA has met the DfEE's

¹ Bolton's statistical neighbours are: Walsall, Kirklees, City of Derby, City of Bristol, Tameside, Stockton on Tees, Leeds, Dudley, Enfield and Bury.

request to pass the increase in education SSA on to the local schools budget (LSB), both in 1999/2000 and in 2000/2001.

	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/2000	2000/01
Budget / actual (£000)	101597	104294	103220	115685	117864 ² .	123768
SSA (£000)	95727	100892	101589	111919	117517	123220
Budget / actual as % of SSA	106%	103%	102%	103%	100%	100%

Source: LEA

19. The LEA delegated 80.8 per cent of the LSB in 1999/00 compared to a metropolitan average of 82 per cent. In 2000/01 82.4 per cent of the LSB is being delegated. Bolton has, by a substantial margin, met DfEE targets for 2000/01 in relation to percentage of the LSB delegated; changes in delegation level; changes in the age weighted pupil unit (AWPU) rates; percentage increases in delegated funding per pupil and the ceiling on spend on statutory duties.
20. The total central expenditure per pupil in 2000/01 is around the average for metropolitan authorities. Within this average, expenditure on statutory and regulatory duties is low (£38 per pupil compared to an average of £48). Expenditure on SEN provision is, however, considerably higher than average (£203 per pupil compared to an average of £147 per pupil), including very high expenditure on central support for pupils with statements. The LEA is now consulting with schools about delegating substantial parts of these resources.
21. Bolton has been very successful in recent years in attracting additional funds into education in the borough. There have been substantial increases in the resources available to improve and build new schools through the New Deal for Schools (NDS) and other capital resources. The LEA has received more than the average amount per pupil over the NDS programme. An imaginative range of partnership schemes is bringing resources into schools for technology, sport and community initiatives. The strong central drive on developing partnership working is contributing to this success.

Council structure

22. The Borough Council has 60 elected members: 34 Labour, 15 Conservative and 11 Liberal Democrats. The Council has recently revised its decision-making structures in line with the Government's guidance for modernising local government. A cabinet of ten members, comprising the leader and nine portfolio holders, is responsible for the overall management of the borough's business. The cabinet reports to the Council, which also receives

² The apparent shortfall in passing on the increase in SSA is accounted for by: retrospective adjustments on discretionary rate relief; recharges on insurance premiums; and the use of reserves. The DfEE has accepted that the increase in SSA has been passed on to schools.

inputs from six area fora (building on established consultative practices in the borough). Four scrutiny committees have been established to review the work of the Council but had not met at the time of the inspection.

23. The management and finance committee of the Council meets regularly as the education committee when the 21 standing members are joined by two elected parent members, two diocesan nominees and five advisory members from the education community.
24. The education and arts department is one of eight departments of the Council and the directors of these departments, together with the chief executive, form the executive management team (EMT). The EMT gives strategic direction to the organisation and promotes effective liaison between officers throughout the borough and with other agencies and private and voluntary sector organisations. The director of education and arts meets weekly with her senior officers as the departmental policy team (DPT) and this group meets regularly with all unit and service managers to review policy and operations. There are well-established consultative arrangements with schools, and altogether over half of the headteachers in the borough are members of partnership advisory groups.

The Education Development Plan

25. The borough's school improvement strategy 'Building on Success' was launched in 1997. Headteachers, governors, members and officers have worked together closely to ensure that the strategy is reviewed and to promote social inclusion in line with local social and economic regeneration schemes. 'Building on Success' was an effective means of providing leadership for schools. It helped to focus LEA services on the contribution they make to raising standards in schools, and in advance of the national Fair Funding initiative, began to define the responsibilities of schools and to set out expectations for LEA services. In this respect, the strategy laid the foundations for the formulation of the borough's EDP.
26. The first draft of the EDP was approved conditionally by the Secretary of State. The two specific conditions related to defining more clearly the LEA's strategy for supporting schools causing concern and to delegating further funds for continuing professional development. This reflected a need to revise the school improvement strategy in line with current expectations of local education authorities. A revised EDP was submitted in March 2000, and approved by the Secretary of State, with the general conditions applied to all revised EDPs. The revision addressed the specific concerns identified in 1999. The procedures for categorising schools according to need are commented upon in paragraphs 38-43 of this report. There is now an explicit statement of the LEA's policy and procedures for schools causing concern and a much clearer statement of intention and actions than in the original EDP.
27. Despite these improvements, the EDP overall still lacks some clarity and detail. The audit indicates a very wide range of school needs but the plan

does not set out clearly how the provision will differentiate between these needs. Although the revised EDP includes an appropriate procedure for categorising a school's needs and LEA support, many activities relate to all schools. School visits confirmed that a high level of responsiveness and flexibility characterise the good support the LEA offers to schools but this tends to blur the distinction between purchased services and those provided through centrally-retained funds. Nevertheless, the plan is comprehensive, there is a high level of take-up of its activities, the costs are reasonable and it is relevant to local needs.

28. The targets set in the plan are challenging and good progress is being made towards meeting them, although greater progress will need to be made in English if the 2002 target is to be met. The targets are, for the most part, realistic and, particularly in some very low attaining schools, have had the effect of significantly raising expectations of pupils.
29. A strength of the EDP is its linkage to other plans. The plan makes good connections with corporate plans and initiatives, bringing together partners from the public, voluntary and private sectors. The children's services plan, quality protects management action plan and the behaviour support plan are of good quality and link well to the EDP.
30. An EDP monitoring group meets regularly to review progress and reports to the departmental policy team and, under the new Council structure, to the management and finance committee. Progress in implementing the plan in schools is good, despite weaknesses in the success criteria used, many of which are too vague to enable the effectiveness of the plan to be evaluated. Improving a service is too often identified as a measure of success with no further definition of what improvement might mean, or what level of improvement is sought. The progress reports made by the monitoring group are thorough but there is insufficient opportunity for the Council to evaluate the impact of the plan on school improvement.
31. In practice, the picture is better than this. Schools are clearly aware of the priorities set out in the EDP and find them relevant to their needs. Consultation on the plan, and on its revision, was extensive and schools were closely involved in its formulation and re-drafting. The link between the EDP and school development plans was judged to be good in two-thirds of the schools visited, and to be unsatisfactory in only two schools. In one school, the actions in the EDP had been mapped onto the school development plan, identifying precisely how the school was planning to access the provision available.

The allocation of resources to priorities

32. The corporate process, used throughout the Council, is effective in allocating resources to priorities. It helps to develop links between planning and resource allocation at both the corporate and departmental levels, and provides a link into cross-cutting issues.

33. The LEA has good systems for allocating financial resources to schools. Schools are consulted extensively on budget priorities during the autumn. They receive rough indications of their budgets in February and final notification in the middle of March. The LEA has moved some resources into the primary sector and the balance of resources between primary and secondary schools is around average for metropolitan authorities. A local management of schools working party has been set up and a needs-led funding formula is currently being negotiated with schools. Altogether the changes proposed could provide schools with an additional £5 million resources. The changes will accommodate the growth of non-teaching staff that has taken place, increase non-teacher contact time and change the small schools funding factor. A review of delegated funding for schools for special educational needs is also taking place.
34. There is a central process in place for the review of individual services which is being adapted for Best Value reviews. The LEA has produced a good Best Value performance plan that has received an unqualified opinion from the district auditor. Pilot reviews have been carried out on the school meals service and on delegation of resources for special educational needs. In 2000/01, a review is being carried out of education social work.
35. Examination of the two pilot Best Value reviews shows that the LEA still has substantial work to do to make the process sufficiently challenging and rigorous. Both reviews were led by service providers and this reduced the extent of challenge. Further work is needed to develop external comparisons on the cost and effectiveness of the services. In part, this relates to the general lack of information available for these early reviews, and in the case of special education needs services, comparative information on outcomes is not straightforward. The LEA recognised these weaknesses in its evaluation of initial reviews. The inspection findings for the Best Value review of school meals are reported in Appendix 2.

Recommendations

In order to improve the effective implementation of the education development plan, future versions of the plan should:

- incorporate a clearer link between audit and provision; and
- improve the means of measuring success and evaluating the impact of the plan.

In order to improve the Best Value review process, future reviews should:

- increase the amount of external challenge involved in the process;
- start the process of developing comparative information for services now rather than waiting until the reviews take place;
- encourage schools to focus on their requirements; and
- draw up more tightly focused action plans with measurable success criteria.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Implications of other functions

36. Strengths in the borough's approach to partnership working are having a positive impact on school improvement. The good links between the arts, libraries and museums sections of the department have resulted in focused project work and inter-departmental operations with a clear focus on raising attainment and promoting social inclusion. Arts and music services have made a major contribution to the celebration of educational achievement that has been an important theme for the borough in the past year. Close links also exist with the Community Education Service, the Lifelong Learning Partnership and the Bolton and Bury Chamber. Liaison with the latter is mainly through the Education Business Partnership and joint action on aspects of curriculum development in Key Stages 1, 2 and 4.
37. Finance and personnel functions operate efficiently and are purchased by a high proportion of schools. The injection of capital resources has produced substantial improvements in some of the worst school buildings. The Council, and the leadership given by the chief executive, reinforce the corporate priority to raise standards and tackle disaffection. The few weaknesses that there are in the support for school improvement are mainly in services which target individual pupils: although strategically sound, the quality of delivery is too dependent on the strengths of individual staff, and not sufficiently focused on rigorous systems and measures of outcome.

Monitoring, challenge, support, intervention

38. The education department's approach has strengths but also some weaknesses. Relationships with schools are very good, with a high degree of confidence in officers who work in this area. The revised EDP incorporates a clear statement about the means by which the LEA monitors schools' performance, challenges schools over their targets, provides support, and where appropriate, intervenes in schools. Categorisation of need is on a five-point scale. This was still a recent initiative at the time of the inspection. Schools understand the rationale for the LEA's policy and its detailed implications for them, including the triggers for intervention used by the LEA. Two-thirds of schools are categorised by the LEA as 'light touch', and require little monitoring.
39. The advisory service is small in comparison with metropolitan boroughs and its costs are below average. Ten advisers are retained to meet the LEA's EDP priorities and plans and a small team of advisory teachers, funded mostly through national initiatives, supports them. The service is ably led, with clear strategic direction and a performance management system that is beginning to link outcomes in schools to the effectiveness of advisory support. Advisers are, for the most part, well qualified; a series of recent appointments has brought recent and highly relevant management expertise into the team. They are also well regarded by schools for the purposeful way in which they challenge them to have high expectations.

40. Schools in similar categories on the five-point scale receive very different levels of support. Sometimes, particularly in schools identified as having higher levels of need, this is due to a well-balanced judgement between the development needs of the school and the capacity of the school to lead and manage those developments itself. This is a strength of the LEA's work, focusing its resources on aspects of need. In its 'light touch' schools there is less clarity about monitoring and support functions, although there is a very high level of commitment shown by advisers in their willingness to respond to school needs.
41. The basic level of 'entitlement', as most (but not all) schools view their allocation of time, is three days per year. This is supplemented in over 85 per cent of schools by a buy-back arrangement amounting to some £80,000 worth of advisory work that has been delegated in the last two years. A flat-rate charge of £600 is made for each school to access advice in line with the school development plan. The school's link adviser often provides this support, or acts as a broker for other LEA staff.
42. The majority of the LEA-funded work in schools is focused on monitoring. However, what is not clear to schools, or indeed serves their needs best, is that much of this time is dedicated to monitoring the LEA's implementation of the national strategies for school improvement as set out in the EDP. In practice then, the need in many schools is for an evaluation of the school's improvement against its priorities, whilst the LEA supplies an evaluation of the school's progress in implementing the EDP priorities. Advisers, and officers, reconcile this tension by providing high levels of service to those schools that ask for it and are, rightly, held in high esteem for their responsiveness to need and their willingness to support schools. The relationship between monitoring and support would be more helpfully clarified by reducing the time spent on monitoring LEA effectiveness through school visits, and by delegating further the advice and support function to promote stronger self-evaluation in schools.
43. In three schools visited, the LEA's choice of the deployed adviser meant that there was insufficient expertise available to the school, yet these advisers had expertise that was highly relevant to other schools. An increased delegation of advisory functions would enable schools to exercise greater choice and to match the expertise of the purchased adviser to the school's needs. Overall, the LEA's support for school improvement was sufficient to meet the school's needs in 16 of the schools visited. It was effective in 14 schools, and good in over half of the schools. Given the relatively small size of the advisory team, this represents good value for money.

Collection and analysis of data

44. Data collection and analysis are growing strengths within the LEA. Over the past few years an increasing range of helpful raw score and benchmarking data have been made available to officers and schools to enable them to analyse progress and set targets for future action. Effective links are being

made with other departments and key partners, at a borough level, to enable information relating to education to be analysed alongside corporate, as well as national data.

45. Whilst the collection and sharing of data are progressing well, particularly where effective collaborative groupings such as the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership are in existence, some schools and officers are not yet using the data proactively and confidently. The school survey confirms this picture with a considerably more favourable response to the LEA's provision of data on pupil performance than to the guidance provided on its use.
46. There is, however, recognition of the need for more support on the use of data and the LEA has responded positively in a number of ways. Wider access to data electronically is also in the LEA's sights and all schools have now been provided with, and trained to use, the Assessment Manager software as one step in this process.
47. An important use for the data generated on attainment has been the annual target-setting process between schools and the LEA. This got off to a slow start with, for example, nearly half of the secondary schools indicating through the school survey that support for planning and target setting is poor. Primary and special schools were less critical. School visits, as well as discussions with heads and governors during the inspection, indicate that this year the target-setting meeting between headteachers and the link adviser has been more focused, rigorous and challenging than previously. This is partly the result of a more systematic approach to the role of the link adviser as well as a greater familiarity, on both parts, with how the school and LEA target-setting processes inter-relate. There are, however, schools where the target-setting discussion was not sufficiently challenging and where governors were not fully involved.

Support for literacy

48. The LEA's support to primary schools in raising standards of literacy is good. Support for raising standards in the secondary phase and in some special schools is not as strong. This is reflected in the attainment pattern in the borough. At Key Stage 1 results improved in 1999 and are now in line with the national average, as are results at Key Stage 2. At Key Stage 3, however, attainment falls below the national average for the percentage of pupils gaining Level 5 and above and below statistical neighbours for Level 6 and above. Targeted work to raise standards of writing amongst boys has been particularly successful in Key Stage 1. At Key Stage 3, while there is still a need to focus on boys, girls' results have deteriorated against both the national average and that for statistical neighbours.
49. LEA targets for Key Stage 2 were exceeded in 1999. In 2000, however, the LEA's target is five per cent higher than the aggregated school targets. The effectiveness of the literacy strategy, together with the LEA's support for

specific schools, should help the LEA to meet its 2002 target for eleven-year-olds of 80 per cent.

50. The EDP identifies the need to raise standards in English and the LEA's literacy strategy has focused primarily on the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). Whilst the implementation of the NLS is effective and valued at a school level, there are some weaknesses in its overall planning and management. Documentation is fragmented and action plans are insufficiently detailed, particularly in relation to how the impact of key people's work is to be evaluated and how it links in to other related activities. The quality of the NLS training and support provided by the consultants and advisory teacher are mostly good and schools are particularly appreciative of their accessibility and of the advice offered on classroom practice and resources. A wide range of resources can be borrowed through the School's Library Service, which works closely with the literacy team. Joint activities have been mounted and last year, for example, there was a successful summer reading game, supported by the local paper, that involved around 2,000 seven-to 12-year-old pupils.
51. Support at the secondary level has been patchy, although it is beginning to pick up speed as the focus moves more clearly to transition across Years 6 and 7. A number of successful summer schools were run last year; a two-day conference on literacy for secondary schools was well attended and collaboration through cluster groups is providing opportunities for secondary teachers to visit primary schools.
52. The establishment of a well-attended Literacy and Numeracy Steering Group provides a forum for the LEA to bring together a wide range of people involved with basic skills. This group is not yet effective in ensuring that the large amount of resource provided to schools and in the community is co-ordinated and targeted appropriately. Plans exist to address this through the establishment of a Bolton Literacy Trust.

Support for numeracy

53. Support for numeracy is good. The implementation of the National Numeracy Strategy has got off to a good start. There is already evidence of improvement in Key Stage 1 test results although results, while in line with statistical neighbours, are below the national average. At Key Stages 2 and 3, however, results are in line with those nationally. If progress continues at its current rate, the LEA is well on course to meet its target for 11-year-olds of 75 per cent in 2002. OFSTED school inspection reports indicate that progress at Key Stage 4 is at least satisfactory and is good in the majority of schools.
54. The planning for, and implementation of, the national strategy are good. The LEA wisely invested in appointing its numeracy consultants early, in January 1999, and this enabled the team to move quickly to support those schools requiring early intervention. In addition, strong links were forged with the literacy team, which is housed in the same centre, at an early stage so that

planning was informed by the implementation of the literacy strategy. Plans for the current year take into account a range of monitoring information which, as in literacy, includes a systematic programme of observations by link advisers, and there is clarity about how different elements of the plan will inter-relate. What is less clear is how the numeracy strategy links in to other numeracy activities in the borough and how value for money is to be evaluated in relation to their impact on teaching and learning, and standards.

55. The support provided for numeracy in primary schools is very effective. The work of the consultants is valued by schools, particularly the provision of accessible and very practical help for planning, teaching and the development of appropriate resources. The increasing level of confidence in the teaching of numeracy is tangible. In the secondary phase and in special schools, the support is less effective. The LEA has provided a number of opportunities for secondary staff to learn from what is happening in primary schools.

Support for ICT

56. Support for information and communication technology is good, both in terms of curriculum and technical support and in the links between the two. The support has been well targeted at primary schools and has, therefore, had less impact in secondary schools. Support for ICT is rightly, identified as a priority in the EDP. OFSTED school inspection evidence demonstrates that attainment and progress in the borough at all key stages are at least comparable to the national average; however, the LEA recognises that there is still much to do. The importance of a clear focus on raising standards of attainment is emphasised in the good quality ICT development plans. A particular strength in this area is the priority placed on regular and integrated monitoring and evaluation.
57. The LEA, in an entrepreneurial venture with a private provider, has developed a wide range of helpful curriculum materials that build on good practice and support primary practitioners in the classroom. In addition, appropriately targeted and effective training has been provided for ICT co-ordinators and other teachers. This has enabled a confidence in the use of ICT, particularly at a primary level, to be widely established. The ICT team's work has had less influence on secondary schools. However, the recent opening of the Virtual Teachers Centre is helping to extend provision and discussions are underway to extend the primary team's work into Key Stage 3. The team's work has been recognised nationally with a BETT award two years running, including the Best Support for School Improvement award.
58. An effective level of support has been provided, particularly to primary schools, for hardware purchase and leasing. The reliability of the equipment, and the responsiveness of the ICT centre in helping schools with the installation and maintenance of equipment, are strengths. A higher level of support has been provided than in many LEAs and this has been helpful to primary schools. The support provided to secondary schools has been more mixed as schools have tended to manage their own development. In a

small number of schools, this independent work is not proving wholly successful. However, in some parts of the borough the establishment of links between secondary and primary schools to support future ICT development is progressing well. Schools view the advances in electronic communication less positively. The development of broadband communications by the northwest consortium accounts for some of the delays in implementation.

59. Until recently, the LEA developed its own systems for administrative ICT in schools. It decided, rightly, that the increasing pace of development of management information meant that this route was no longer viable. A basic suite of integrated administrative packages is in place and is being used increasingly effectively by schools. Parallel administrative and curriculum systems exist in many schools and the benefits of closer integration of these are being explored by the LEA.

Support for schools causing concern

60. LEA support for schools causing concern is sound. Recent changes to operational policies have increased its effectiveness, giving greater clarity to the purpose, nature and level of support the LEA provides and involving governors more fully in the process. Regular reviews of schools causing concern are held at advisers' meetings and by the departmental policy team.
61. Between 1993 and May 1999, two schools were placed in special measures. One, a special school, was subsequently closed and the other, a primary school, was brought out of special measures in just over two years. Altogether, this was a good record for the LEA. Since May 1999, a further three primary schools have been deemed to require special measures. One was the subject of an amalgamation proposal that has since been rejected by the Secretary of State, and another was a former grant-maintained school that had had little previous involvement with the LEA. Since 1997, six schools, one nursery and five primary schools, have been judged to have serious weaknesses. Monitoring of these schools and evidence from the schools visited suggest that they are making at least satisfactory progress in implementing their action plans. In three schools, significant and sustained improvement in pupils' attainment, with good LEA support, has taken place in the last three years.
62. Senior officers and advisers are playing an increasingly effective role in liaising with governors and school managers in schools causing concern. Additional funding has been made available to support schools' action plans, and a wide range of LEA staff, including personnel officers, has been deployed to monitor and advise on progress. The LEA has not used its powers of intervention, although additional governors have been appointed by schools, but has given good consideration to the use of these powers and has discussed intervention with some schools. Experienced headteachers and senior managers have been seconded from other schools, with the LEA playing an important role in brokering this support.

63. The procedures established in 2000 for identifying schools causing concern are already leading to a more discriminating analysis of schools' needs and a recognition of the very wide range of factors that can lead to a school failing. Their strength lies in the LEA's willingness to construct an action plan that is tailor-made to the needs of the school. Nevertheless, in two schools visited there was insufficient urgency in the LEA's communication of, and response to, the needs of these schools. There is no systematic approach to giving headteachers and governors the opportunity to discuss the extent of the LEA's knowledge of a school's progress, or its diagnosis of the next steps.

Support for governors

64. Links with governors across the LEA are strong and the support provided is good. Support comes primarily from two services: the governor support service, (that oversees statutory work and the purchased clerking service) and the Bolton teachers' centre that offers training. The two services are managed by one senior officer so enabling each to inform the other. The LEA takes appropriate steps to meet its statutory responsibilities and provides appropriate and timely advice, training and information. Difficulties in recruiting, particularly local authority governors, have been addressed and recent arrangements to allow governing bodies to nominate suitable LEA candidates are helping to ease the situation.
65. Most primary schools and nearly a quarter of secondary schools buy their clerking service from the LEA. The service is highly regarded. Schools report that clerks are knowledgeable, helpful, willing to broker a school's needs and efficient. Where services are not bought back it is mainly because schools, with some justification, feel the cost of the service is high, or because the school prefers to use one of its own staff in the role.
66. This year all schools have subscribed to the LEA's training programme for governors. The training is well supported and praised for its relevance and quality. There is a well-established mechanism in place for assessing governors' training needs and for evaluating the effectiveness of provision. While many governors attend training off-site, there is increasing access to good quality on-site training to address issues specific to a school.
67. Governors are consulted well and find the LEA's senior officers approachable and responsive. There are still some areas where the LEA is more involved with governing bodies than necessary, such as the attendance of a LEA officer at secondary school governing body meetings. This is a service that governors appreciate, but ought to be delegated to schools to enable them to make individual purchasing decisions about its value.

Support for school management

68. Support for school management is generally sound, although there are weaknesses in how it is planned and targeted. Schools have access to a

reasonable range of support. There is, though, a lack of an overall strategy that draws on all of the information available, brings coherence to the various strands of support and enables it to be targeted appropriately.

69. Management support comes primarily through the general advisers and through access to a centrally organised conference and training programme. The training programme is drawn up in consultation with partnership groups. It encourages involvement in the national leadership programmes and is appropriately evaluated and valued by schools. Involvement in training is voluntary unless there is a clearly identified need, for example, a new headteacher or senior management in a school causing concern. The EDP lacks a co-ordinated and targeted approach to addressing the general weakness, identified in school inspection reports, in relation to school management support for, and monitoring of, teaching and curriculum development. The LEA's use of the recent OFSTED self-evaluation training has been only partly successful in addressing this need, as has the link adviser work in some schools.
70. Support for teaching in primary schools is mainly provided through the effective implementation of the national literacy and numeracy strategies and through curriculum development in ICT. Training for co-ordinators, particularly in the monitoring and evaluation of practice, is seen as part of the agenda. However its impact in schools is patchy. Support for secondary middle managers is through the heads of department meetings. Support for development of the curriculum, where it has been made more widely available, has focused on developing areas such as vocational education. Appropriate plans to make wider use of advanced skills teachers and Beacon schools are currently under discussion with headteachers.
71. Bolton's provision for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) is rated highly by the majority of the teachers, and by their schools. The induction materials and initial induction session set out clearly what the teachers can expect over the year. The supporting training programme is consulted on and is targeted to meet identified needs. A well-supported residential course in the first term helps NQTs to establish their own network and good access is provided to a range of other support. Helpful training is provided for mentors. Link advisers have been responsible for undertaking two classroom observations of each NQT this year and identifying specialist support as necessary. For some schools, where well-established structures to support and monitor NQTs already exist, this level of observation by the LEA is not needed.

Support for early years

72. Support for early years is good. Early years education is seen as a priority within the LEA, which currently funds nursery provision for all three and four-year old pupils in a mixture of maintained, voluntary and private settings. The establishment of an influential Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership, together with the appointment of an enthusiastic and highly regarded early years team, is strengthening this provision. Opportunities

have increased for joint working and a co-ordinated and consistent approach to improving the quality of education offered.

73. OFSTED reports show that in over 50 per cent of schools nursery pupils make good progress and that progress is poor in only three per cent of schools. Furthermore, the LEA's analysis suggests that, in comparison with the national picture, a higher percentage of Bolton voluntary and private sector providers are achieving good inspection reports.
74. Whilst the majority of places (97 per cent) are taken up in LEA settings, the early years development and childcare partnership has worked hard to bring together all providers of early years education. The chair of the partnership is independent, and has overseen a thorough and collaborative early years development and childcare plan that takes account of the breadth of provision and focuses clearly on standards and the different needs of children. Thought has been given to how evidence should be collected, not only to identify needs but also to demonstrate the impact that early years work is having on raising standards of attainment and the quality of provision.
75. There is effective collaboration across a range of agencies and, in particular, strong links have been forged across departments within the LEA, bringing together strategic thinking and operational planning. However, collaboration within the department has not always been as strong as this, and inconsistent messages have been given to schools in the past. The strengthening of links with general advisers and with other key teams, for example the literacy and numeracy teams, is helping to address issues of consistency, coherence and progression. A childcare information service was established through the library service last year, and this year an early years excellence centre has been opened. The centre has been funded jointly by three departments (education and arts, housing and social services) and is enhancing the early years team's ability to build on and disseminate good practice. Other innovative and high quality activities, such as the artists in residence programme linked in to the museums service, have extended the range of educational experiences available to young children.

Recommendations

In order to give greater clarity to functions of advice, support and monitoring:

- delegate further advisory functions to schools; and
- reduce the number of monitoring visits made routinely to all schools.

In order to make best use of all the resources available for literacy and numeracy, in partnership with other relevant organisations, establish:

- a strategy for co-ordinating literacy, numeracy and basic skills projects in schools and in the community; and

- a robust method of evaluating the impact of the LEA's work in literacy and numeracy in relation to the raising of attainment and value for money.

In order to ensure that the support and development needs of all senior and middle managers are addressed:

- a strategy for supporting school management should be drawn up in consultation with the relevant partners.

In order to ensure that schools causing concern are given the greatest opportunity to improve, develop recently implemented procedures by:

- communicating LEA concerns about a school to governors and headteachers as clearly and as quickly as possible; and
- establishing a formal review process, involving staff and governors, to discuss school and LEA action plans, to agree strategies and to monitor progress.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate planning

76. Corporate planning is a strength of the LEA. Raising standards of attainment and the quality of education are key components of the borough's 'Vision for the Future' and its aspirations for the 'Learning Town' initiative. Borough-wide partnerships, involving public, private and voluntary sectors, are a strong feature of the LEA, with a clear focus on social inclusion and economic regeneration. The 'Vision for the Future' partnership is responsible for single regeneration budget (SRB) bids and for ensuring coherence across the high level of external funding, including European funding, that the borough has been successful in attracting. The SRB4 project is managed by the education and arts department and the SRB6 bid is linked closely with the Breightmet and Tonge Education Action Zone (EAZ). The borough is exploring innovative ways of bringing together the management of all external regeneration funding for education in this area under the direction of the EAZ.
77. Corporate plans are clear, draw upon extensive consultation with all stakeholders, and are matched well to the needs of the borough. The Corporate Plan, renamed the Bolton Plan in April 2000 to embrace the borough's Best Value performance plan, is an impressive document linking together a wide range of corporate initiatives and making good use of public/private sector initiatives and funding. The three-year strategic plan for the education and arts department is updated annually and is derived from the objectives set for the borough. Implementation of corporate plans is very good, with evidence of success in meeting their objectives across the borough. An in-depth evaluation of the City Challenge initiative, undertaken by an officer, identified that the approach adopted initially had failed to secure the full involvement and commitment of schools. The borough responded positively to this evaluation and has secured more effectively schools' commitment to subsequent projects.
78. Multi-agency co-operation is very much part of Bolton's approach to its work in key areas of support. Cross-departmental working parties, many involving other agencies, are effective in ensuring co-ordination within the LEA. For instance, the children's and young people's working party has oversight of initiatives across the borough, and its achievements include the development of strategies to improve standards for children in public care and the development of the early excellence centre for Bolton. Strategic planning and liaison with the social services department are good. The chief executive sets out clear expectations for cross-departmental working and holds regular briefings for the 200 most senior managers in the borough, to review and promote corporate development.
79. Decision making in the borough is characterised by openness and by a willingness to consult and involve the community, school representatives and all political parties in the process. This is particularly true of the extensive budget consultation process described earlier in this report. At the time of

the inspection, the revised Council structure had not become fully operational so no evaluation of its effectiveness could be made.

80. Strategic leadership of the LEA is good. Elected members consult widely and access a range of opinion before taking decisions. They are well advised by officers, who prepare concise and helpful reports for their consideration. Schools are appreciative of the leadership given by the director of education and arts, who was appointed in 1996, and her senior colleagues. She has gained the confidence and trust of schools, demonstrating a willingness to consult, to listen and to act decisively. She represents the education and arts department in the management of corporate activities such as the drug action team, and steering groups for 'Vision for the Future' and the youth offending team.
81. Partnerships with schools and governors, and with wider groups such as the early years and lifelong learning partnerships, operate effectively giving the opportunity for debate and challenge. The EAZ is linked closely to the borough, both strategically and operationally. For example, the EAZ Director is on the EDP monitoring group and the deputy director of education and arts is (at the EAZ forum's request) on the sub-committee that is re-writing the EAZ action plan. Close links have been established between the EAZ and the LEA literacy, numeracy and ICT staff, as well as with the principal adviser over the development of strategies to improve teaching and learning in the zone.

Management services

82. In relation to delegation of funding for services, the LEA responded to, and met the fair funding requirements, rather than choosing to initiate delegation. Consequently, service agreements are not well established and schools, particularly primary schools, have not developed high levels of purchasing skills. The level of delegation was in line with the wishes of many schools. An increasing number of schools are however, realising the benefits of further delegation.
83. For services delegated in 2000/01, schools were provided with information just in time to make decisions on buying them back. Contracts were established initially for one year and there has been a high buy-back of most services. Discussions have started with schools much earlier about service agreements for next year and about the length of contracts for different services.
84. Finance and personnel support services are highly valued by schools. Personnel advice is good and has assisted many schools in restructuring and in handling difficult staffing issues. Changes due to the reduction in primary pupil numbers, the primary review and implementation of the class sizes plan have hastened the need for restructuring in a number of schools. Schools have received effective financial support in facing this restructuring. Eight per cent of schools had deficits of more than 2.5 per cent in April 1999.

Schools with deficit budgets have plans to return to financial stability within agreed timescales.

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION

Strategy

85. The LEA has a well-written SEN policy document that provides a sound basis for planning. Taking advantage of its compact size and positive, open relationships with schools, the LEA maintains a match of provision to the requirements of its pupil population and of schools. There are effective systems for consultation with representatives of schools and parents.
86. The LEA's operational planning has strengths, reflecting this practical and responsive approach, but strategic planning is weaker. The LEA lacks an effective view of the pattern of provision that it is striving toward, or that it is prepared to commission from external providers. This is reflected for example, in the way in which special schools are aware of a need to develop their roles, but are uncertain what exactly they should aspire to. The special schools visited did not, therefore, have effective criteria for admission. The LEA continues to purchase a significant number of places for pupils outside of the borough, specifically for severe physical, behavioural and autistic disorders. There is little strategic mapping of the desirable type, balance and nature of provision sought in the medium term.
87. The funding of special schools has been amended to remove earlier inequities and to reflect need more adequately. However, the system now in place, as the LEA acknowledges, reflects piecemeal adaptations to earlier historical allocations rather than a strategic review driven by the changing pattern of pupil needs.
88. The LEA supports inclusion and has an appropriate view of the processes involved, but not of the intended outcome of these processes. The mechanisms for achieving effective integration, particularly enhancing the capabilities of mainstream schools to educate pupils with SEN, and supporting links between special and mainstream schools, are not yet established. Positive progress is being made in the co-location of the two schools for pupils with moderate learning difficulties on shared sites with mainstream schools.
89. The LEA's administrative procedures for producing statements of SEN are very effective. However, advice from paediatricians and therapists is not timely and one-third of statements are being delayed on this account. The quality of recently written statements is good.
90. The current demand for statements is high, and the LEA is taking steps to reverse the year-on-year rise in the proportion of pupils with statements in order to avoid this proportion becoming unmanageable. Schools have not yet fully come to terms with the notion that 'central' funding for statements is, in fact, coming from their own budgets. The LEA is working hard to raise schools' awareness of this as part of the strategy to reduce demand for statements.

91. The LEA has produced sound criteria for the placement of pupils at the stages of the Code of Practice for SEN. These have provided helpful guidance for schools in their management of the Code of Practice and have helped the LEA and schools avoid undue controversy over the allocation of resources.

Statutory obligations

92. Annual reviews of statements are conducted to time, and the LEA is represented appropriately at review meetings. While many schools are able to set relevant and measurable targets for pupils, it is rare for these targets to be reviewed at the end of the year. This means that the rates of pupils' progress are not clear.

Improvement and value for money

93. The pilot Best Value review of SEN resources, conducted in spring 2000, was poor. It did not give a clear idea of the nature of the service and there was no evidence that the need for the service had been fundamentally challenged. Information was not presented on the effectiveness of current service delivery and options for developing a market for alternative providers were not examined. The Best Value review documentation did not, however, give a fair representation of the quality of the services and the extent of the thinking about the process of delegation of SEN resources to schools. Extensive consultation has taken place as part of the review and it has led to a programme for further delegation of resources.
94. The main service involved in the pilot Best Value review and the support of pupils in schools is the Mainstream Teaching Support Service (MTSS). All support for SEN pupils, including behaviour, communication and low incidence support services, has been managed under this heading for three years. In addition to its central funding commitment to the MTSS, the LEA displayed a lack of strategic foresight in funding centrally a massive growth in school-based special needs assistants who now total 350 staff. The £6.3 million costs of centrally-funded SEN services are substantial and are more than the total staff costs for the rest of the education department. The LEA is now gradually dismantling the service at a pace that suits schools' wishes but faces the prospect of having to ensure that it also keeps up with national initiatives and developments.
95. Although the LEA's service surveys elicit consistently positive responses from schools, evidence from the inspection was more variable. Services to meet the needs of pupils with sensory impairments are always good; advice and direct support to pupils with more generic learning and behavioural difficulties are more dependent upon the quality of the individual concerned. Headteachers seek increased levels of delegation and control of such services in order that they can use the funding more flexibly to meet the needs of pupils. The LEA is, rightly, pursuing this objective with care and realism, but the scale of the task is moderating the pace of development.

96. Pupil support and educational psychology services make some contribution to the development of schools' capabilities to meet pupils' special educational needs. However, all schools and, in particular, special schools would benefit from more direct access to specialist professional advice on curricular and organisational issues. The budget for educational psychology services is below the average for metropolitan authorities.
97. The LEA is weak in measuring improvements in educational attainment in relation to the substantial central support service costs. Nevertheless, the seeds of some pioneering work are beginning to develop and the LEA is highly motivated, and well placed, to make further progress in this area. At this stage, though, it has no effective means of judging whether services provide value for money.
98. The LEA is in a good position to respond to the national programme for action relating to parents. It has a successful parent partnership scheme in place and has responded in a measured way in establishing parental support and conciliation arrangements, building on previous good practice. The number of cases requiring the intervention of the SEN tribunal is very low. In addition, schools are clear regarding the amount of funding delegated for SEN, but the LEA does not monitor the spending and governors do not report adequately to parents. The lack of central monitoring of the use of these resources is a weakness.

Recommendations

In order to strategically develop a more inclusive education system:

- set out a plan for the future of mainstream and special school provision; and facilitate further improvements in relationships and links between mainstream and special schools.

In order to ensure that SEN resources are used to best effect:

- monitor the use of delegated resources for SEN.

SECTION 5: ACCESS

The supply of school places

99. The LEA has been forward-looking in reviewing primary provision. The primary population is reducing and surplus places, although currently lower than average, would have reached 23 per cent by 2002 if no action were taken. The LEA consulted schools in drawing up proposals and developed a joint approach with the diocesan authorities. A plan was drawn up combining the removal of surplus places and the implementation of the class size plan. This would have removed over 3,500 places. Consultation with parents, schools and the community on the proposals was extensive. The LEA was effective in drawing up workable proposals in consultation with schools; objections were submitted primarily in relation to three schools. Ministers have approved the proposals for 3,139 places, nearly 90 per cent of the places in the LEA plan, but rejected the proposals to close two schools. In one case this has left the LEA with the difficult challenge of turning around a school with a falling roll and in special measures.
100. In January 1998, 4,433 Key Stage 1 children were in classes of 31 or over. This reduced to 1,387 in 1999. It is expected that from September 2000 there will be no infant children in classes of 31 or over in the borough. The LEA effectively linked the primary review and class size plans to make best use of resources and to avoid the turmoil involved with two separate consultations. Although not all primary schools like the changes to their standard numbers, the LEA managed to balance conflicting interests well.
101. The LEA consulted schools effectively on the expansion of secondary provision in the borough. The number of secondary pupils is currently increasing. Falling numbers were, though, a cause for concern in one school and the LEA has taken positive action to address the issue by, for example, a substantial building and school relocation programme. This refurbishes the school, provides more specialist teaching accommodation and releases buildings for the relocation of two special schools on mainstream sites.

Admissions

102. Admissions processes operate satisfactorily with sensible criteria, satisfactory information to parents and the appeals process being handled in a timely fashion. There are, however, tensions that the LEA is trying to resolve through the admissions forum, and through discussions with individual schools. Primary and secondary appeal rates per thousand pupils are lower than regional and national averages. Although a comparatively low percentage of appeals was heard, the percentage decided in the parents' favour was higher than average.
103. Individual schools handle admissions to nurseries with agreements between schools in cluster arrangements. In some of these clusters, timetables for admissions are usefully coordinated, and agreement has been obtained

through the admissions forum on a co-ordinated timetable throughout the borough.

104. The LEA handles admissions and the initial allocation of places to community schools. The LEA's criteria for admissions are unusual in giving a low priority to siblings. The major tension is, though, over admissions to two voluntary aided schools that operate their own admissions processes. This causes the LEA to offer more places in its own schools than are available until the admissions to the aided schools are completed. This creates uncertainty for pupils, parents and schools. The LEA is working constructively through the admissions forum to try to improve the procedures.

Asset management planning

105. Bolton has been very successful in attracting substantial extra resources to invest in its school buildings. Asset management planning in the borough is effective. The LEA has invested in extra staffing to meet the DfEE's requirements for the process. Schools receive good technical support from the LEA for their maintenance responsibilities. There have, however, been some problems with on-site management of some building projects.
106. Up to four years ago, Bolton received a low level of capital resources for building improvement. The local LEA reviewed its approach and since then has increased capital resources from £2 million in 1996 to £13 million in 1999/2000 from annual capital guidelines, basic needs resources and New Deal for schools. A private finance initiative scheme at Castle Hill has received Treasury credit approval. In addition, approval has been given for further capital investment of around £5 million to implement the primary review. This investment is being managed effectively to make the maximum impact on the condition of schools in the borough.
107. The large expansion of the building programme has led to problems in some of the schools, where work has had to be done during the school day or where the school has had to move into temporary accommodation during building works. Concerns relate primarily to the lack of clarity of the client role and on-site responsibility for dealing with difficult issues. The LEA responded by setting up a project management group to examine the lessons learned from these projects and is making changes as a result.
108. The DfEE deadlines for the asset management planning process have been met and the LEA has information available that allows it to set clear priorities for building investment. Schools have received condition survey information and a consultation group has been established with primary and secondary representatives to establish priorities. Arrangements are in hand for school self-assessment of accommodation suitability issues, using DfEE guidelines.
109. The building maintenance division provides a good property services consultancy to schools. Where schools require it, the consultancy manages

the selection and supervision of building contracts on behalf of schools. Schools visited were positive about the quality of service provided.

Social inclusion

110. The LEA prioritised the promotion of social inclusion in both versions of the EDP. It has focused more clearly on the specific desirable outcomes, such as reducing unauthorised absence and exclusions, which are driven by nationally imposed targets. In other areas, outcome targets, or strategies to achieve them, are less specific. Short-term, impressive gains have been made, creating a foundation upon which the LEA can continue to develop a broader strategy. Overall, reasonable steps are taken to meet statutory duties and satisfactory value for money is achieved.

Attendance

111. LEA support for improving attendance is good. Until 1998/99 pupils' attendance and unauthorised absences were in line with national and similar LEA averages, with the exception of unauthorised absence in secondary schools, which was higher. With targeted support from the LEA, secondary schools have made significant inroads into reducing rates of unauthorised absence and are on course to achieve their 1999/2000 target.

112. In January 2000 the LEA separated out 'improving attendance' as a discrete priority in the revised EDP, thus sensibly recognising its strategic significance in promoting school improvement and social inclusion. Good quality consultation, planning and service delivery have enabled a partnership to emerge with schools in which the differentiation of service levels according to need is acknowledged and accepted. The differentiated provision is not always clear in an individual education social worker's practice.

113. The most successful strategy for improving attendance is 'first day of absence' follow-up by schools. Those secondary schools with the most chronic problems receive additionally targeted support for this purpose. However, if attendance in these schools does not improve, the targeted funding is withdrawn, thus ensuring, quite properly, that the LEA gets 'something for something'.

114. The LEA has recently conducted truancy sweeps in the town centre. Liaison between the education social workers and the police was exemplary and the operation was considered a success, with 170 pupils approached. However, less than half were returned to school as the rest were accompanied by parents, who condoned their absence. At the time of the inspection, no systematic analysis of the subsequent attendance of these pupils in order to assess the relative merits of this strategy has been undertaken. Two other weaknesses, also identified by schools in the survey and during visits, are the lack of clarity about the LEA's parental prosecution strategy (which is being revised), and frequent staff changes. Only two secondary schools have retained the same education social worker over the last two years. The

strengths of the core activities of the service outweigh such weaknesses. The cost is in line with similar LEAs and value for money is good.

Behaviour support

115. LEA support for improving behaviour is sound. Until 1998/1999, the number of pupils permanently excluded from schools was in line with similar authorities and national averages and slightly declining, although the number of boys excluded from secondary schools was higher. The number of exclusions has reduced remarkably in 1999/2000 to 42 at the time of reporting, almost half of the 1999/2000 target of 80, and way ahead of the 2001/2 target of 60. This is a significant achievement.
116. The LEA has produced a good quality behaviour support plan and has sensibly made a separate priority to reduce the number of fixed and permanent exclusions in the revised EDP. It has appropriately brought services to support improvement in behaviour under a good quality management structure, and targeted support at early years and pupils at Stage 3 of the SEN Code of Practice. Strategic and operational planning are good. Prompted by the LEA, and with support from Standards Fund monies, five schools have successfully established in-school centres to manage pupils with behavioural difficulties.
117. Schools have been successful in managing targeted resources to meet the particular needs of pupils and are seeking to extend this practice, particularly in the secondary phase, to peripatetic support services. This is an appropriate development, leaving the LEA to commission and manage services for those pupils who are outside the school system. It does so with varying degrees of success.

Provision of education otherwise than at school

118. In order to provide education otherwise than at school, and to supplement the two existing pupil referral units (PRUs), the LEA has recently established an off-site unit for pupils at Key Stage 3. Placements are allocated at two per secondary school per year for six weeks, with a view to subsequent re-integration into school. In addition, it manages a youth challenge programme for Key Stage 4 pupils who provide substantial challenges in terms of drug abuse and criminal behaviour and for whom re-integration has proved impossible. Both schemes are operating reasonably successfully but without formal DfEE approval, although the LEA has applied for PRU status for the former. The placement of pupils who are not on a school roll is carefully monitored, and ambitious plans are already in place to provide full-time education for such pupils, in line with national requirements. In the meantime, the LEA provides a modest range and amount of alternative provision.
119. There are some weaknesses. Half of the 25 pupils involved drop out of the Youth Challenge scheme, reflecting the nature of the challenge posed by these seriously disaffected young people. The lack of registration of the

scheme as a PRU means that these pupils are not included in the LEA's GCSE examination data. In addition, the criteria governing the allocation of in-school behaviour support services is not always clear to schools, which leads to misunderstandings. For example, in one case, a nine-year-old pupil was permanently excluded by a governing body that flouted regulations which led to an enforced five months absence from school.

Children in public care

120. LEA support for children in public care is satisfactory and the LEA is well prepared for the next stage of development. The LEA knows who the pupils are and their level of educational attainment. Training has been timely and given a high profile. As a result, each school has a designated teacher, in advance of the national target date. Appropriate protocols are in place between education and social services staff in terms of identifying pupils and monitoring their progress. Each department will have a designated officer in place as of September 2000. The LEA is beginning to move from identification and monitoring of pupils to supporting improvement in attainment and life chances.

Health, safety, welfare, child protection

121. LEA support for the health, safety, welfare and protection of pupils is satisfactory, with one exception. Liaison between the LEA and relevant social services and health agencies is good at a strategic level. The quality of day-to-day dealings with social services personnel at school and local office level is, though, more dependent on the efforts of individuals than robust systems. Sound child protection systems are in place and are being revised in a timely manner to comply with new guidance, but the LEA cannot systematically identify the level of training that designated teachers in each school have received. This is a weakness. The LEA makes a valued contribution to the work of the Area Child Protection Committee, and based on an analysis of documentation provided, appropriate systems are in place to ensure the health, safety and welfare of pupils.

Minority ethnic and Traveller children

122. LEA support for pupils from minority ethnic heritage is invariably sound, with several strengths. Until 1999/2000, targets for pupils from minority ethnic heritage were, inappropriately, not included in relevant plans such as the EDP or the EMAP. As a matter of equal opportunities policy, the Council did not collect corporate data by minority ethnic groupings. Since then, all appropriate data and targets are in place, although the lack of longitudinal data means that target setting is aspirational rather than soundly based.

123. The LEA has fulfilled the requirements of the distribution of the Ethnic Minorities and Traveller Achievement Grant (EMTAG). It is appropriately supporting school improvement by delegating 85 per cent of the funds to schools, most of which have bought-back the service or employed their existing teacher(s). Satisfaction in schools is high and the LEA displays its

commitment to such pupils by contributing additional resources to support target groups in special schools and those that are not covered by the EMTAG. The rapid response to the arrival of small groups of refugees/asylum seekers is particularly impressive, and welcomed by schools. This displays good and flexible use of targeted resources.

124. The LEA provides very good support for Travellers and has developed very high quality relationships with the different Gypsy and Traveller communities. Individual pupil support is the dominant mode of provision. The work to influence curriculum thinking and practice is at an early stage and Council site facilities and eviction policies militate against stated principles of social inclusion and valuing diversity.

Action to address racism

125. The LEA is working closely with the Commission for Racial Equality, the Police and other departments to respond to the recommendations of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry. There had been a nil return by schools of the previous racial monitoring form so it has been redesigned and reporting systems have been updated. School governors have received training and headteachers have been appropriately briefed about the recommendations of the inquiry. A new training programme for school staff is planned for September 2000. All of the measures taken are in line with the inquiry's recommendations but the 18-month time lapse prior to implementation was unnecessary and too long.

Recommendations

In order to improve the secondary admissions processes:

- work with the Admissions Forum and schools to reconsider the priority for siblings and to improve co-ordination of admissions between community and voluntary aided schools.

In order to improve the management of future major building projects in schools:

- improve the clarity of the client role and the execution of project management.

In order to improve practice in promoting social inclusion:

- improve attendance at, and regulate, education otherwise than at school; implement measures to improve the attainment of children in public care; and
- regularly monitor the training levels of designated teachers for child protection in each school.

APPENDIX 1: SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve the effective implementation of the education development plan, future versions of the plan should:

- incorporate a clearer link between audit and provision; and
- improve the means of measuring success and evaluating the impact of the plan.

In order to improve the Best Value review process, future reviews should:

- increase the amount of external challenge involved in the process;
- start the process of developing comparative information for services now rather than waiting until the reviews take place;
- encourage schools to focus on their requirements; and
- draw up more tightly focused action plans with measurable success criteria.

In order to give greater clarity to functions of advice, support and monitoring:

- delegate further advisory functions to schools; and
- reduce the number of monitoring visits made routinely to all schools.

In order to make best use of all the resources available for literacy and numeracy, in partnership with other relevant organisations, establish:

- a strategy for co-ordinating literacy, numeracy and basic skills projects in schools and in the community; and
- a robust method of evaluating the impact of the LEA's work in literacy and numeracy in relation to the raising of attainment and value for money.

In order to ensure that the support and development needs of all senior and middle managers are addressed:

- a strategy for supporting school management should be drawn up in consultation with the relevant partners.

In order to ensure that schools causing concern are given the greatest opportunity to improve, develop recently implemented procedures by:

- communicating LEA concerns about a school to governors and headteachers as clearly and as quickly as possible; and
- establishing a formal review process, involving staff and governors, to discuss school and LEA action plans, to agree strategies and to monitor progress.

In order to strategically develop a more inclusive education system:

- set out a plan for the future of mainstream and special school provision; and facilitate further improvements in relationships and links between mainstream and special schools.

In order to ensure that SEN resources are used to best effect:

- monitor the use of delegated resources for SEN.

In order to improve the secondary admissions processes:

- work with the Admissions Forum and schools to reconsider the priority for siblings and to improve co-ordination of admissions between community and voluntary aided schools.

In order to improve the management of future major building projects in schools:

- improve the clarity of the client role and the execution of project management.

In order to improve practice in promoting social inclusion:

- improve attendance at, and regulate, education otherwise than at school; implement measures to improve the attainment of children in public care; and
- regularly monitor the training levels of designated teachers for child protection in each school.

APPENDIX 2

Best Value Inspection

Bolton MBC

Review of school meals

October 2000

Introduction

The Local Government Act 1999 requires all Best Value authorities to secure continuous improvement in the way their functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Best Value authorities must prepare Best Value performance plans for each financial year and conduct Best Value reviews for all their functions over a five-year cycle. Where reviews cover education functions of Councils, OFSTED, with the help of the Audit Commission, has the responsibility for inspecting them to determine whether authorities have complied with the requirements of the Best Value legislation and associated guidance.

The Bolton school meals review was carried out as a pilot review prior to the publication of much of the available guidance. However, it is included in the Council's Best Value performance plan and was offered for inspection as a part of the OFSTED LEA inspection.

The documentation of the review was examined, client and contractor representatives were interviewed, the views of a sample of headteachers were obtained and meals were sampled in one primary and one secondary school. The work was done during the course of the OFSTED/Audit Commission inspection of Bolton LEA, in June 2000.

Summary and recommendations

The inspection demonstrated that Bolton's in-house commercial services arm provides a good school meals service. It is valued by most schools, take-up is high compared with most metropolitan boroughs and costs are reasonable. The service won the last contract let by the Council under compulsory competitive tendering legislation and has also won other work against private sector competition more recently.

The government has, from 1st April 2000, required LEAs to delegate the budget for school meals to secondary schools and to those primary schools who wish it. This Best Value review concentrated upon the need of the in-house contractor to respond to this new situation. The review, although limited in scope, has been positive, consultative and school (though not pupil) focused. The response of the contracting arm to delegation, set out in this review appears likely to lead to improvements in an already good service. However, these have not really been driven by Best Value principles, rather by the requirement to delegate funding.

The review was less than the fundamental re-appraisal envisaged for Best Value reviews. The authority has acknowledged that it needs to learn from pilot reviews and there are lessons to be learned here. The review was, in essence, a business re-focusing exercise for the contracting arm. As such it was a reasonably sound exercise. However, as a Best Value review, there should have been greater emphasis on users' views, greater challenge to the purpose of providing the service and its intended scope. There should also have been a wider consideration of the alternative provision and of the alternative providers, a more active comparison with other services, not only the relatively limited benchmarking

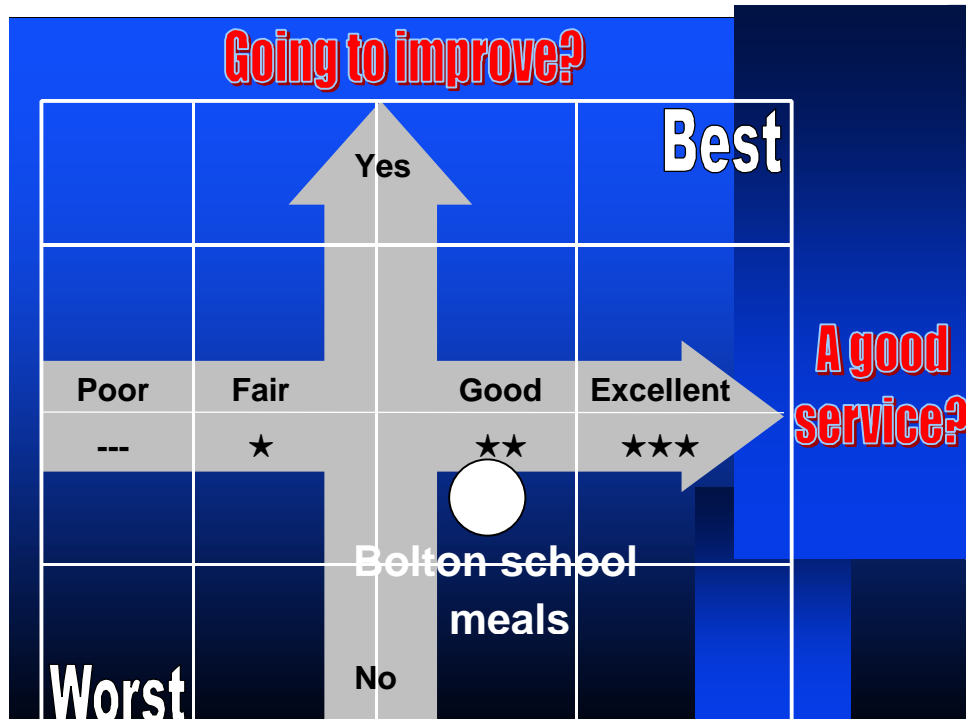
with other LEA school meals services that was done. A detailed analysis of resources and more precisely specified improvement plans should also have been undertaken.

The Authority has recognised many of these limitations in the conclusion of the review report. We believe it has the capacity and will to learn from this pilot review, to improve its review processes and to continue further in improving its school meals service.

Recommendations

We recommend that the authority should;

- i. examine the lessons from this pilot review, and in future reviews: increase the degree of external challenge, re-examine the fundamental assumptions of services, consider a wider range of alternative modes of delivery, consult service users as well as high-level purchasers and produce action plans with clear, quantifiable, resourced, time-related targets;
- ii. further develop benchmarking for school meals on the client side, with a more detailed examination of cost elements, quality, uptake, methods of delivery and styles of product;
- iii. further develop client support to encourage and lead schools in being active and responsive to pupils and parents expectations of catering and in developing and monitoring catering services. This applies to schools opting for the centrally funded meals service as well as those with delegated budgets; and
- iv. revisit issues not explicitly tackled by the review after the trial year of delegated provision which include policy on subsidy and where to draw the line between subsidised and non-subsidised provision, central retention of kitchen and equipment budgets, reducing queuing, the cost/quality balance, the advantages/disadvantages of cooking on site, the potential strengths/weaknesses of other providers.



The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

FINDINGS: HOW GOOD ARE THE SERVICES?

Are the authority's aims clear and challenging?

The existing aims are clear, but not especially challenging. Questions were asked during the review process, but the answers were largely answered from the existing policy framework.

Should the service be provided at all?

Existing Council policy in Bolton is of long standing and is to offer cooked meals of a good standard in schools and to encourage take-up. This has been taken as read and the boundaries of statutory duties and of existing policy have not been seriously questioned. The funding for kitchen equipment can be delegated but this has not been considered in the review.

Should the authority continue to act as provider?

Although this question is discussed in the review conclusion, it is clear from earlier documentation that the aim of the review was primarily to maximise provision by the in-house team through attracting schools custom under the new delegation arrangements. The decision to increase client support for schools choosing to use an external contractor or employ their own staff was, however a result of genuine re-thinking.

Should the pattern of provision be maintained?

The starting point is the pre-existing service specification. High take-up and a previous, pre-CCT exercise were cited as justification for not following through this question. The LEA has produced written guidance to schools wishing to opt out of the central contract on the standards that they may wish to specify. The service offers breakfast, vending services and themed promotions as well as cafeteria style lunches in secondary school and traditional meals in primary schools and meals that follow ethnic minority requirements. The service, following the review, aims to be flexible to schools' wishes over changes to style but has not set out to lead any change. The Council makes arrangements for meals to be cooked on the premises where practicable.

Does the service meet the aims?

Processes are in place to ensure that specified standards are met by the in-house service. Internal quality assurance processes of the meals service include consultation with representative pupil groups, parents and regular meetings with schools.

Inspection evidence indicates that the service has, since the review exercise began, become more willing to listen to schools and be more flexible in service delivery to meet school needs. The majority of headteachers were satisfied that meals were now delivered efficiently, that there was a nutritious choice, costs were reasonable and that the needs of minorities were met. The Best Value review identifies ways that the provider intends to continue consulting schools and increasing its flexibility.

Some schools continue with employing their own staff or external provision and remain convinced of the advantages of this. Their reasons for this have not been probed deeply in the review.

The LEA programme of building investment has produced improvement in kitchen facilities in a number of schools and headteachers confirmed the beneficial effect on the quality of meals. In one school visited where the meals were cooked off the premises, there were reported to be problems with freshness. Even with improved facilities, school visits confirmed that the flow of pupils through dining areas is problematic. School timetables have shortened lunch periods making the logistics more difficult. Choice of meals can become restricted at the end of meal periods.

How does its performance compare?

Benchmarking work is in the early stages and outputs are limited. As a result, it is not possible from the review to judge whether the authority is in the top 25 per cent, although indicators show a generally positive picture on take-up and costs.

Benchmarking is being developed with the nearest neighbours school meals benchmarking group which includes 14 local authorities. Bolton meal prices are 8 per cent above the average for the group and contract charges for a traditional meal are 5 per cent below the average in primary and 19 per cent below the average in secondary.

Audit Commission indicators show that Bolton is in the top quartile for uptake of meals in primary schools. DfEE statistics show that the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals who take them was considerably higher in Bolton than the average for Northwest authorities (89 per cent compared to 83 per cent).

In recent years, Commercial Services have won some contracts in competition with private providers, including the contract for Bolton Sixth Form Colleges in 1998.

Findings: Are They Going to Improve?

Does the Best Value review drive improvement?

The level of challenge in this review has been limited by being led by Commercial Services, the provider arm. Nevertheless, in responding to delegation, greater customer focus and a willingness to respond to individual school needs is evident. The agreement to offer client advice to schools wishing to make other arrangements is a positive result of the review. The interim service level agreement that has been set up with the in-house service provides a period of adjustment for both schools and the service. During this time variations to the existing pattern should emerge as schools find their feet in the marketplace. Service improvement seems likely, albeit driven more by the response to delegation than by a more fundamental questioning.

The review team decided that consultation with pupils and parents was a matter for schools, and consulted only headteachers, as the future purchasers. There was, however, a parent representative on the review team and the service management had regularly monitored pupil opinion as a part of normal quality monitoring. Nonetheless, to review the service fundamentally, consultation should have gained users' perspectives, including pupils, parents and staff taking school meals. The questions could have addressed issues, unlikely to have been covered adequately within previous monitoring, such as style of meals, the cost/quality balance, the organisation of dining and sales and healthy eating questions. An opportunity for a full debate, informed by both user views and technical knowledge of the possibilities, has been missed.

Lack of benchmarking has limited the opportunity for measurable improvements and developing broader aspirations. Ongoing work on benchmarking needs to produce, for example:

- comparisons with private sector alternatives;
- comparison with other authorities subsidy rates;
- breakdown of operating costs into components and showing year on year comparisons;
- examination of overheads including client side costs;
- more detailed examination of uptakes including trends and healthy meals; and
- more examination of different ways of doing things in other authorities, and for example in foundation and independent schools and private sector canteens.

The review mentions that some private sector comparisons were sought but is silent on the outcome. Consideration of private sector involvement was rejected as impracticable within the timescale.

How good is the improvement plan?

The service action plan 2000 was produced at the end of the Best Value review. The plan has eleven key tasks which are mostly oriented towards provider

developments. The tasks identified are important but the action plan and its targets needs to have more clarity and a greater customer focus. In particular

- the actions should be more specific and measurable; and
- responsibilities should be assigned and timescales drawn up.

The intention to support any school wishing to explore outsourcing or employing its own staff is not specific enough on how it will operate and how support and monitoring will be delineated and paid for.

Criteria for measuring the success of the review are indicated in general terms to be the development of understanding of the new trading environment, technical development of the in-house service and improving current standards and take-up, but are not articulated in specific terms that can be monitored clearly.

Will the authority deliver the improvements?

The authority has demonstrated a commitment to improve the service and overall has a good record in implementing change. A number of outcomes from the review will drive the service forward. Commercial pressures on the service should reinforce this. The authority needs to ensure that it maintains the momentum in encouraging schools to lead developments, and it should return to some of the fundamental issues that it has not yet tackled.

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