



**OFFICE FOR STANDARDS
IN EDUCATION**

**INSPECTION OF
BLACKBURN WITH DARWEN
LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

January 2001

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

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APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

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

2. The inspection was partly based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA, on school inspection information and audit reports, on documentation and discussions with LEA members, staff in the education department and in other Council departments, and representatives of the LEA's partners. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on aspects of the LEA's work was circulated to 84 schools. The response rate was 90 per cent.

3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to six primary, two junior, one infant, five secondary and three special schools. The visits tested the view of governors, headteachers and other staff on the key aspects of the LEA's strategy. The visits also considered whether the support which is provided by the LEA contributes, 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. Evidence from other HMI visits to schools in the LEA was also considered. In particular, there was a simultaneous inspection of the Education Action Zone; the findings for this inspection are set out in a separate report.

COMMENTARY

4. Blackburn with Darwen serves a largely economically disadvantaged population and is the twenty sixth most deprived authority in England. Unemployment is above the national average with growth in the service sector and a relative decline in the still dominant manufacturing sector. Over a quarter of the LEA's pupils are from ethnic minority groups.

5. In April 1998 when the LEA was established it inherited a formidable legacy of under-performance: very high numbers of schools causing concern, very high levels of exclusion and anomalous and expensive provision for pupils with special educational needs. It also inherited, and has not been able to amend or influence, a pattern of school provision and parental choice which have led to an undesirable degree of ethnic imbalance in its schools.

6. From the outset, elected members and senior officers have determined that this was an unacceptable position and have demanded improvement, adopting the maxim 'Aiming high, including all'. The LEA is well on course to attaining its goals. The LEA is very challenging and has not been afraid to tackle difficult issues. It has been able to establish a mutually trusting relationship with its schools because of the high credibility and dynamism of its officers, its supportive mechanisms and the visible progress being made. The LEA has engendered a climate of excitement and a feeling of collegiality in its schools.

7. The work with schools causing concern is outstanding. At inception, ten schools required special measures or had serious weaknesses. All have improved and consequently have been removed from these categories. Indeed, several have been judged to be good schools in subsequent inspections. This is a remarkable, unique record that is not paralleled elsewhere in the country. It has been recognised deservedly by the award of Beacon status for the LEA.

8. The LEA has already had a marked impact on raising standards in its schools. Improvement rates in end of Key Stage 2 tests are among the highest nationally. There was little progress in improving GCSE results in the first two years, but there is a significant improvement in the provisional results for 2000.

9. The LEA has been very successful in bidding for external funding. This has resulted in schools receiving additional support that blends well with other LEA initiatives. For instance, partnership with the Education Action Zone (EAZ) is strong and productive. The LEA has very effectively reduced infant class sizes, managed the closure of two special schools and reduced surplus places. It has appropriately given high priority to an ambitious and comprehensive review of special educational needs (SEN). It has articulated a clear strategy, but progress is too slow on reaching decisions about how the principles will be implemented and managed.

10. The performance of the following functions are particularly effective:

- quality of planning within education and the Council as a whole;
- consultation with schools over major plans;
- support for schools causing concern;

- provision of data for target-setting;
- monitoring, challenge, support and intervention;
- support for literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) in primary and special schools;
- support for early years;
- support for school management;
- support for governors;
- strategy for reducing exclusions;
- financial advice;
- support for property issues; and
- allocation and management of resources for school improvement.

11. The LEA performs most of its other functions satisfactorily. The weaknesses are in the following functions which are either not adequately performed now, or were undertaken inadequately until so recently that the effect of changes are not evident in the schools:

- SEN assessment and statementing procedures; and
- support for attendance.

12. In summary, the LEA is effective and has achieved a considerable amount in a relatively short time. A growing reputation for excellence means that it is being used to advise other, less successful LEAs. It has had to prioritise and much work remains to be done, particularly in secondary schools, on SEN issues and weaknesses in liaison with social services schools. It is in an excellent position to meet these challenges given its proven track record, its existing high quality as an organisation, its very high standards of leadership and the good relationship it enjoys with its schools.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

13. Blackburn with Darwen became a new unitary authority on 1 April 1998. It comprises the two main urban areas of Blackburn and Darwen together with a small number of villages. Population is approximately 139,500 with a higher proportion in the age-range 0-15 than found nationally. There are severely deprived areas and the authority ranked 26/310 on the 1999 Index of Local Deprivation. Unemployment is above the national average. Longer term trends show a growth in the service sector and a relative decline in the still dominant manufacturing sector.

14. The proportion of pupils in Blackburn with Darwen schools eligible for free school meals is above the national average:

FSM % 1999	LEA	National
Primary	28.9	20.5
Secondary	28.2	18.1

15. The proportion of pupils from ethnic minority groups (27.6 per cent) is high and drawn mostly from Pakistani and Indian descent. Overall, 26.3 per cent are classified as having English as an additional language (EAL). The demography of the borough results in some areas being populated by the minority ethnic communities and other areas being predominantly of white European heritage.

16. In September 2000 there were 82 maintained schools and one pupil referral unit (PRU). In January 2000 the number of pupils was as follows:

LEA Maintained Schools	Number	Pupil Population
Nursery	9	786
Primary	59	14,546
Secondary	9	9,502
Special	5	420
PRU	1	149

Only one of the secondary schools has a sixth form. The LEA offers a place to every four-year-old whose parents wish it. There are eight independent schools, six of which are Islamic ones.

17. In January 2000, 4.5 per cent of pupils had a statement of special educational needs (SEN) which is above the national average. Almost half the pupils in special schools came from outside the borough.

18. In 1998, the proportion of Y11 pupils (63 per cent) staying on in full-time education was significantly below the national average of 68 per cent. This fell to 61 per cent in 1999 and the LEA is not on course to meet its target of 66 per cent by 2002.

Performance

19. Baseline assessment shows that attainment on entry to primary schools is well below the national average. Attainment is below the national average at all key stages except for English at Key Stage 2 which is in line. For instance, in 1999 the percentage of pupils gaining five or more grades A*-C was 35.9 per cent compared to 47.9 per cent nationally.

20. In the two years following inception, the new LEA had a significant impact on standards in primary schools. Improvement rates at Key Stages 1 and 2 tests were better than nationally except for mathematics at Key Stage 1 which was in line. The improvements in English and mathematics results for 11-year-old pupils were amongst the highest for all LEAs. The picture at secondary level was a very different one. The improvement rates for 1997-9 were below the national average at GCSE level and for English, mathematics and science at Key Stage 3.

21. Results for 2000 indicate that progress has been sustained in the primary schools and that GCSE results have improved markedly. For instance, the percentage of pupils gaining five or more GCSE grades A*-C rose from 35.9 per cent to 40.2 per cent. This reflected improvements in seven out of the nine secondary schools.

22. Analysis of 1999 GCSE results show that girls significantly outperformed boys and the gap was widening while, on average, pupils with Indian heritage attained higher than white UK or pupils of Pakistani heritage.

23. Further analysis of OFSTED reports shows that in the 26 primary schools inspected twice there have been improvements in both the quality of education and school management.

24. Only six secondary schools have been inspected twice. On this limited evidence there have been improvements with regard to school ethos, but some slippage with regard to quality of education and school management.

25. A comparison of the LEA's attendance rates and rates of improvement to those observed nationally and in similar LEAs are given in the table below:

	LEA	Attendance 1999		Improvements 1997/98-1998/9	
		National	Similar	National	Similar
Primary	93.4%	Below	Above	Below	Below
Secondary	89.7%	Below	In line	Below	Below

Provisional data for 1999-2000 show significant improvements in overall attendance rates at primary and secondary level. Targets for reducing unauthorised absences have been met in primary but not secondary schools.

26. Permanent exclusions reduced significantly from 64 in 1997-8 to 24 in 1998-9 but rose to 44 in 1999-2000.

Funding

27. From its inception the LEA has spent above education SSA, reflecting the high corporate priority given to education and schools. The Council has robust budget making and control processes and is developing longer-term strategic service and budget planning under strong leadership from elected members. The new education department, working closely with the corporate centre, has established effective strategic management of education resources. The Council inherited schools that had experienced recent budget cuts, had low delegation and a complex funding formula. However, spending had been above SSA and there were no significant issues around the disaggregation of budgets.

28. In 2000/01 the Local Schools Budget (LSB) is £2,989 per pupil, higher than that of statistical neighbours (£2,869) and the average nationally (£2,817). Schools' delegated budgets at an average of £2,469 per pupil are also higher than those in similar authorities (£2,422) and the national average figure (£2,373). This reflected an increase of 15.4 per cent from last year which was nearly the highest nationally.

29. The Council is very successful in bidding for external funding; for example after-school and community education provision have been funded from £1m funding from the New Opportunities Fund. Bids are well coordinated, sometimes by the executive directors who also progress multi-disciplinary issues such as the private public partnership. Funding through specific grants is double the national average and above any other comparator LEA. Since 1998 £6.6m total capital has been gained, mainly through New Deal for Schools and infant class size grants but also includes £93,000 from the schools regeneration budget.

Council Structure

30. The Council consists of 36 Labour, 20 Conservative and six Liberal Democrat members. From May 2000, the Council has piloted one of the alternatives recommended by the Government's white paper, Modernising Local Government. There is an Executive Board and one of its eight members has an allocated responsibility for education and lifelong learning, supported by three lead members.

31. The policy and review committee (PRC) has a scrutiny function and commissions task groups to investigate identified issues. Responding to concerns expressed by schools, a task group is currently looking at provision for pupils with social and emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD). There are two other groups which have responsibilities for evaluating the work of the LEA, reviewing the performance of schools and monitoring the progress of schools causing concern respectively. It is appropriate that the PRC is completely independent, but the lines

of communication with these groups and the reports it should routinely receive, are not sufficiently defined.

The Education Development Plan

32. The EDP is of high quality. It reflects national priorities but is also based suitably on an audit of the LEA's schools. In particular, it has a good plan to improve the high number of schools causing concern it inherited, and also strategies to target under-achieving groups. It clearly defines actions, success criteria and responsibilities.

33. The priorities set for school improvement are appropriate. They are briefly: management and leadership, quality of teaching, numeracy, literacy, attendance and reducing exclusions, and schools causing concern. The plan comprehensively sets out a coherent strategy for school improvement that is feasible and meticulously costed.

34. The LEA has reviewed progress during the first year and produced a very good report on implementation of the EDP. A strength is the rigour with which the LEA evaluates its own performance and this candour has enabled it to improve its performance further. The report records the rapid progress in reducing exclusions, but appropriately draws attention to the unsatisfactory progress in both school attainment and attendance in secondary schools. Schools were widely consulted and subsequently the results were shared with them. Owing to the changing political structure, the report has not yet been formally received by the PRC.

35. In the light of the progress report the priorities were retained, but some activities and strategies were amended. Appropriately, greater emphasis is afforded to the headteacher's management of self-review and the reporting to governors on quality and standards. Also, more support is being allocated to literacy and numeracy in secondary schools. These changes are well grounded in evidence and logically argued.

36. References to ethnic minority pupils are integrated into the first EDP. The strategies are further developed in the context of teaching in the revised EDP. There is not a sufficiently coherent strategy, however, across the other priorities to address issues raised in Section five of this report. In particular there is no reference to promoting cultural harmony included in the activities to promote citizenship.

37. In October 1998 the LEA secured an education action zone (EAZ). The EDP incorporates EAZ activities across all the priorities. This reflects the good collaboration between the EAZ and the LEA, and has underpinned the effective liaison and joint support to schools within the zone. One of the EAZ projects, 'Parents as Educators', has been successfully shared with non-EAZ schools. The dissemination of other initiatives are still at an early stage and progress was limited in the schools visited.

38. The LEA has set challenging targets. It is on course to meet its numeracy and literacy targets at Key Stage 2. Progress towards GCSE targets has been erratic, but recent results indicate that they are achievable. There is good, albeit erratic,

progress in reducing exclusions but unsatisfactory progress in meeting targets for attendance.

39. The LEA development plan incorporates the EDP with strategies for early years, lifelong learning and corporate approaches to tackling social exclusion and community regeneration. This ensures coherent links between the EDP and other corporate and statutory plans.

40. Activity plans within the EDP, especially for literacy, numeracy and teaching, include activities to develop teachers' skills to meet the needs of pupils with SEN. However, in view of the magnitude of the proposed changes in the organisation and management of SEN, more support is required to school senior and middle managers and to the processes of school self-review than is currently detailed in the plans. The appendix to the EDP sets challenging targets for inclusion, but there is insufficient detail about how these will be achieved or the implication for the role of special schools.

The allocation of resources to priorities

41. The LEA has made good progress in extending delegation in response to Fair Funding to 82.6 per cent in 2000-01. Schools are very content with this and confident in the strategic management of funding. They recognise central overheads are high in a small LEA, but also that they are benefiting from central resources such as the coordinated Council bidding for external funding.

42. Compared to their comparator LEAs, centrally retained expenditure for SEN is a third higher but the LEA has plans to delegate much of this from April 2001, and this is examined later in this report. Central administration per pupil is slightly higher than any of their comparator LEAs or the national average, although access is lower than the averages of similar LEAs or nationally.

43. The LMS formula was, rightly, kept stable in the first year of the new authority, being amended only to meet the Fair Funding changes. During that year the formula was completely reviewed and simplified to reflect the needs of schools. Each school's funding is transparent and the system is perceived as fair by all phases, though there has been a redistribution towards primary funding. Schools get advance notice of budgets within three-year indicative budgets. This has given schools confidence in the level of funding.

44. The Council structure and approach ensures resources are well aligned to priorities through effective management and the use of innovative partnerships. The Council has robust budget-making and tight corporate financial control and monitoring processes, and is developing longer-term strategic service and budget planning under strong leadership from elected members. The only out-turn to date was very close to budget. Corporate recharges to education are being closely scrutinised as some may be too high, and Service Level Agreements (SLAs) are being developed between central departments and education which should improve transparency and accountability.

45. In the current year, a 'fresh look' group of elected members has made a radical reappraisal of budget priorities in each portfolio; the executive board then takes a corporate approach to reprioritise and reallocate resources. Each year schools are involved in wide consultation on the range of budget growths and cuts and the LEA has successfully supported schools in reducing surplus balances. Schools' budgets match their needs closely due to increased delegation, reduced central costs and the revised formula. The LEA has been successful in using grants and other funding to improve the worst school buildings.

Structures for securing Best Value

46. The commitment of elected members and chief officers to continuous improvement is evident in several ways. There is an Evaluation Strategy involving headteachers in annual performance assessment of the LEA. The Best Value Performance Plan provides a strong basis for service planning and improvement. The Council will use best value reviews (BVRs) to focus on core activities and purpose and intends to do only 19 large mainly themed BVRs such as 'helping families with young children'. The Council has completed pilot reviews of personnel and legal services which have led to improvements.

47. A number of other pilot reviews are suspended pending the development of a private sector partnership which could cover most technical and management support services. This has the primary aim of increasing their effectiveness and quality but may also reduce costs. The Council has selected a preferred private contractor and hopes that a new business centre will be set up in the town which will win new contracts and so contribute to regeneration and employment.

48. The Council is one of the first to be invited to develop a public service agreement which will bring in up to £5m additional funding in the next five years and freedom from some regulation to achieve additional targets for services and provision for targeted groups. These could include specific improvements in educational attainment at Key Stage 3, other services for children and families and increased community use of schools.

Recommendations

In order to improve the strategic planning:

- the links between the policy and review committee and other groups involved in evaluating aspects of school improvement should be clarified, and also whether the process can be further rationalised.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Implications of other functions

49. The LEA has striven to develop a shared understanding of school improvement with its schools and partners. Key planks in the strategy have been school improvement programmes, headteachers' conferences, benchmark learning groups, and extensive out of school hours provision. These provide a cohesive package to complement the very challenging LEA approach.

50. There are a number of other services that are contributing to school improvement. These services include finance, personnel and property and the multi-ethnic and language service. The Council and heads of service provide very good leadership. There are weaknesses in managing support for attendance, in processing statements for SEN and at the school level in liaison with social services.

Monitoring, challenge, support, intervention

51. This is a major strength of the LEA in each aspect. It adopts a very challenging approach to schools, but this is approved by the schools as it is well grounded in evidence and balanced with a requisite amount of support. The LEA knows its schools very well and its effective intervention strategies are detailed later in this report.

52. There are two main factors contributing to the excellent quality of provision observed. First, the vision and drive of elected members and senior officers that provides the central steer. Second is the quality of the seven school improvement officers (SIOs); this small, skilled group have had a marked, positive impact on school improvement, particularly, but not exclusively, in schools causing concern. In all schools visited, the SIOs had adopted a challenging and constructively critical approach. They had made significant contributions to development planning, establishing monitoring procedures for the quality of teaching and helping the school to improve its self-review evaluation. In all schools the work of the SIO is highly valued.

53. Resources are allocated very efficiently. All schools have received three visits per year focusing on self-review, performance and target setting. Under-performing schools receive additional visits; schools causing concern receive a higher entitlement and there is a clear set of criteria to trigger such action. The visits are well focussed and ably under-pinned by the good data and analysis provided by the central statistical team. Written records are left with the school and clearly identify strengths and weaknesses and areas for development.

54. A significant and very effective feature of the LEA approach is the annual review of schools. This takes place over two days. For each school there is a comprehensive analysis and levels of support needed are determined. The conference is afforded a high priority and attended by all middle and senior managers with a responsibility for schools. It ensures that there is a coherent, joined up approach and that there is a shared view of the overall strengths and weaknesses

of each individual school. Positive outcomes are that support is effectively targeted and examples of good practice are shared.

55. The LEA is not content to rest on its laurels. It has further developed its policy for providing well-targeted support, commencing in May 2000. A central strategy is to produce an individual support and monitoring plan for each school; minimum visiting by SIOs is reduced to two per school per year. It is too early to judge the effectiveness of the new strategy, but it does reflect a commitment to continuous improvement. In view of the high quality of the data held by the LEA, monitoring visits to all schools are not justified, however.

56. The SIO team is well managed at all levels. Performance management is rigorous and high standards are expected. There is a clear structure for disseminating information and a suitable programme for identifying and providing for in-service needs of members of the team.

Collection and analysis of data

57. The LEA provides a comprehensive, high quality set of data to its primary and secondary schools. The data highlights strengths and weaknesses in each school's performance and sets it in a local and national context. A strong feature of the profile is the summary of key facts and the identification of issues. This permits follow-up by the SIO to be sharply focused and is used by schools as part of their own self-review and to guide school development planning. Guidance on the use of data is good.

58. The school profiles do contain some value-added analysis. This aspect is currently being enhanced and work already underway means that the quality of data provided to schools will be improved even further in the near future.

59. There are two aspects not working satisfactorily. The LEA is gathering data relating to the achievement of ethnic minority groups, but incompatibility between the LEA and school computer systems means that complete accuracy cannot be guaranteed. Secondly, the transfer of Key Stage 2 data to secondary schools was performed inefficiently in 2000. Improvements in guidance to primary schools and planned implementation of the pupil-tracking system should remedy these defects for future years.

60. The use of data by the LEA is very good. Its use to monitor the work of schools and the identification of schools causing concern is a model of good practice. This underpins the work of the SIOs and ensures the resources are targeted to areas of greatest need.

61. The support for target setting is good. The process is very rigorous and SIOs have consistently challenged schools where targets were judged to be too low; schools have raised targets as a result. There is good support for governing bodies from the SIO and, when requested, from the central statistical unit. The whole process is very cohesive and understood by all parties. This was confirmed by school visits and by the school survey. Schools, particularly primary and special, rate support as good and as significantly better than the average for other LEAs.

Support for literacy

62. Implementation of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in primary schools and special schools is good and is highly regarded by the schools. Support for secondary schools has been too uneven and therefore unsatisfactory; improvements are planned.

63. The EDP has clear and comprehensive plans incorporating success criteria covering a wide range of initiatives. Developments in literacy are well integrated and coordinated with support for English as an additional language and with EAZ initiatives. Parents are usefully engaged in literacy initiatives through the Better Reading Project. An appropriate range of monitoring and evaluation strategies has also been established.

64. The LEA is the 4th most improved authority in England based on the 2000 results for Key Stage 2 pupils. The proportion of 11-year-olds achieving national standards has risen by 15 per cent since 1998 and the number of pupils reaching higher levels has doubled in the last two years. Significant improvement has resulted from the LEA's work in schools needing intensive support. There has also been an improvement in Key Stage 1 performance in literacy. Progress has exceeded targets in the primary phase and is now well above similar LEAs and close to the national average. Gender differentials reflect national patterns.

65. Support for secondary schools is developing and the NLS is beginning to be implemented; a Key Stage 3 coordinator is being appointed for January 2001. At Key Stage 3, English results are below the national average and declined in 1999. As a result the LEA enhanced its support and results for 2000 show a promising improvement.

Support for numeracy

66. Support for numeracy is very good in primary and special schools, and sound in secondary schools. The previous LEA was one of 12 pilot areas for the National Numeracy Project in 1996 and established a very effective base from which to develop the current initiatives. There has been much improved attainment at Key Stage 1 over the last five years but results are still slightly below the LEA's statistical neighbours and national expectation. At Key Stage 2 the provisional results for 2000 fell just short of the LEA target, and were below the national expectation but overall have improved significantly since 1998. The LEA is on course to meet its targets for 2002.

67. The EDP identifies six activities for numeracy, each of which has a clearly staged programme of development and associated success criteria. The activities are varied and comprehensive, but also focused and well targeted. Links are drawn with improving attainment in multi-ethnic primary schools by introducing family literacy and numeracy courses for Asian heritage families. There is also good liaison with the work being undertaken to support schools in the EAZ. Implementation of the activity plan is highly regarded by schools and monitoring and evaluation

demonstrate that strategies are being effective. All primary schools have received focused visits by SIOs to monitor numeracy.

68. The revised EDP, 2000-2002, puts greater emphasis on support in secondary schools. At Key Stage 3 the results for 2000 improved significantly on the 1999 results, but are still below the national expectation.

69. The mathematics team is capable and well respected; schools consistently report that training is very good. The support team has taken effective action to ensure that the work in schools is well focused to make maximum improvement and has organised a significant amount of training for staff. Leading mathematics teachers provide observation lessons for the benefit of all schools and basic skills teachers have been appointed to each of the secondary schools in the EAZ. Five numeracy summer schools took place in 1999.

70. The range of support and inset for various groups has been well structured to include parents via numeracy guideline documents and training sessions. Family numeracy courses have been undertaken in four schools. All SIOs have been trained on the national strategy. Training for headteachers and governors is also an important part of the strategy and developments are reinforced through the network meetings for mathematics coordinators.

Support for ICT

71. Support for information and communication technology (ICT) is now sound and continuing to improve after an unsatisfactory start. The baseline of ICT provision in 1998 was extremely low and the LEA response was initially inadequate to meet schools' needs. As a result of feedback and consultation with schools provision has been enhanced. The cost per pupil of the revised EDP for 2000-2002 has risen by about ten per cent and is partly due to the request from schools to employ additional ICT support.

72. The LEA is making good progress with implementing the National Grid for Learning (NGfL). Internet access has now been provided to all schools and link institutions such as libraries. The LEA has also entered into partnership to provide on-line curriculum material and a framework for its use. Each primary school and special school has either a suite or clusters of computers as part of the NGfL provision. Schools have to produce an agreed ICT plan before being included and receive good support to achieve this. A useful LEA website has been established and curriculum materials are available to schools.

73. Support for the use of ICT across the curriculum has been too limited, but the position is improving rapidly. NGfL has provided the funding for three ICT consultants to work with schools. The LEA has formed a partnership with a private provider to provide on-line curriculum materials via the internet and appropriate training is being provided. Support for a range of ICT applications is sound in primary; where there are gaps at secondary level the LEA helps schools to identify effective training.

74. Key Stage 3 assessments carried out by teachers show pupils' ICT capability to be below national expectations. This is not adequately monitored by the LEA and therefore schools are not appropriately challenged in this respect; this is also the case for foundation subjects.

75. The school survey reveals that primary schools are now satisfied, but two-fifths of the secondary schools still judge support to be poor. Access to ICT support by schools in the EAZ has been good but for other schools in the LEA support has been less consistent. An ICT development manager was recently appointed plus additional ICT consultants in response to critical comments by schools. In addition, an e-learning manager has been appointed by the LEA to enhance and strengthen provision across all schools.

76. Usefully, an exemplar scheme of work has also been drawn up to assist schools in ICT delivery, and a helpdesk is to be available as part of the ICT managed services. The provision of in-service training has been slow in implementation but many teachers have taken advantage of the basic ICT skills training provided by an further education college as a preliminary to more specialist training. Further training has been appropriately planned at three levels to meet the needs of staff in schools.

Support for schools causing concern

77. Support for schools causing concern is excellent; the LEA's record in providing effective support to these schools is not paralleled elsewhere. In December 1999 the LEA was deservedly awarded Beacon status for 'raising standards through tackling school failure'.

78. The LEA inherited a dire situation; four schools in special measures and six with serious weaknesses (nearly one fifth of its schools and over double the national rate). There was a belief from the outset that this was an untenable position and a determination on the part of elected members and senior officers that pupils must be better served. This has been transmitted very effectively to the schools and even to newly qualified teachers (NQTs) applying to the LEA. It is a success story which means that senior officers are now being asked to support in other less successful LEAs.

79. A specialist school improvement team was set up from the outset with a designated SIO for each school. Support for each school is reviewed meticulously and at least termly. The headteacher and governors meet termly with the monitoring group and are required to produce a written report on progress against key issues. There are confidential reports to the school performance working group which is chaired by a lead member for education. The process is a very challenging one.

80. The LEA has taken decisive action when needed. Financial delegation was temporarily withdrawn from one school and the LEA has confronted directly the issue of incompetency on the part of headteachers or teachers and used very effective strategies. In several schools the LEA input was successfully complemented by EAZ focused support, for example the use of specialist teachers for numeracy and literacy. The outcome is that all 15 schools referred to above have been removed from the special measures or serious weakness categories; the improvement in

some is such that they are now good or very good schools. There is now one primary school in special measures and two schools with serious weaknesses, a greatly reduced and more manageable position than that inherited.

81. The LEA has rigorous and very effective procedures for identifying schools causing concern. Currently there are nine and the early intervention strategies contribute significantly to keeping low the numbers in the more serious categories.

82. The key ingredients in this remarkable effort are:-

- a whole community acknowledgement of the problem and desire for improvement;
- strong, cohesive, tenacious leadership;
- a whole departmental approach;
- full cooperation of schools, teachers and unions;
- use of a small, specialist team for key roles; and
- a high priority for the Council supported by appropriate targeting of resources.

In conjunction with headteachers concerned, the LEA has produced a 'What Works' booklet and CD-ROM which has been well received.

Support for governors

83. Support for governors is good. The school governor service (SGS) has many strengths, including a well-planned and coordinated range of activities for governing bodies. The buy-back rate by schools is consistently high across the different phases. The school survey and the LEA monitoring of services revealed some dissatisfaction with the quality of the clerking service and the lateness in the production of minutes following governing body meetings. The LEA has responded positively by producing an action plan to resolve the problem. The governing body sub-committee monitors reports from the LEA and there is also a briefing report for informing governors about Best Value reviews.

84. All targets have been achieved including a significant increase in Asian heritage and 'working class' governors. The activity plan in the EDP is being implemented in an effective way and monitoring is thorough. There is also an established list of LEA governors to fill vacancies and the number of unfilled LEA nominated vacancies has been reduced from 31 in 1999 to 19 in the current year. Attendance at meetings often includes both a director's representative and a clerk. This is an inefficient use of scarce resources unless there is a significant LEA-related issue on the agenda.

85. There is a good training and support programme involving school-based and centre-based work. Courses are highly rated by governors. Governing body representatives from over three-quarters of schools have attended training. Provision also includes advice and training for appraisal of headteachers, performance management, finance and school improvement. There is close liaison with religious organisations for the support of aided schools; almost all schools have a link governor. Overall, the SGS is well managed, has a clear view of its strengths and weaknesses, and plans effectively to rectify any shortcomings.

Support for school management

86. LEA support for school management is very good. Improving the quality of management and leadership is identified in the EDP as the first priority and is at the heart of the LEA strategy for school improvement. The activity plan in the EDP is implemented according to requirements, and monitoring is thorough. School visits reveal that support is regarded extremely highly.

87. The LEA has implemented good procedures to support primary headteachers. It has established a wide range of initiatives including benchmark learning groups for primary heads to provide mutual support and raise expectations, action research and peer group mentoring with meetings twice per term facilitated by the assistant director (quality development). OFSTED evidence indicates that leadership and management in primary schools is improving rapidly. A major factor in the significant improvement in primary schools is the strong leadership provided by the LEA through the assistant directors and the SIOs and their promotion of school self-review. SIOs also usefully attend the autumn meeting of governing bodies to support headteachers in reporting on the outcomes of the school self-review. The success of the challenging strategies used is evident in the number of schools who have come out of special measures and serious weaknesses.

88. There is good support for the National Professional Qualification for Headship and Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers schemes. The leadership programme sustains a network for heads and deputies and 12 heads have attended the serving heads programme. The support for new headteachers is very good. The HEADLAMP initiative operates efficiently for all new headteachers whereby new heads can benefit from mentoring by serving and experienced headteachers. School improvement conferences for headteachers, deputies and middle managers are arranged annually and are very productive. A particular feature that works very well is the adoption by each school of a theme for improvement; this is then pursued at the conferences. There are also well-organised network meetings for subject leaders and coordinators in schools. The LEA is also planning to use initiatives from the EAZ as part of the training and development programme for senior staff over the next two years.

89. Headteachers receive feedback on their performance, and there are good strategies for working with headteachers whose performance has weaknesses. Governors have received appropriate advice and training as to how to discharge their monitoring and strategic roles.

90. There is very good support for NQTs through a well-planned induction programme managed by the school improvement team. Mentoring by experienced staff in schools forms an important part of the development programme. LEA support was highly rated in the school survey by all sectors.

Support for early years

91. Support for early years is good and there is a well coordinated, coherent, approach to developing provision. The EDP contains a number of references to early years that are well integrated into the priorities and activities such as

management and leadership, quality of teaching and literacy, including family literacy projects. The Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP) has been particularly effective in promoting a number of initiatives and improvements in provision. This development embraces both private and voluntary providers and is a good forum for the sharing of expertise and the discussion of issues surrounding the foundation stage. Officers from education and training are also working effectively with health and social services to establish a multi-agency child development service for young children with disabilities.

92. Staffing is well structured to meet needs and includes an SIO and an early years manager, plus a pre-school development worker and childminding services manager to support provision in areas of disadvantage which includes close links with the EAZ. The authority has made some promising developments in provision: for instance, it has established one Sure Start project and a children's information service is now in place. There is also an extensive training programme in place for schools, voluntary and private providers. A working party led by the SIO responsible for early years has produced a curriculum guidance document which has been distributed to all providers and is well linked to a good range of courses to assist the foundation stage implementation. Monitoring of pupils will also be undertaken via a tracking system being developed in the LEA.

Support for out of school activities

93. There is very good provision for out-of-hours learning. The LEA has helped 44 schools to access New Opportunities Fund (NOF) since 1998. The co-ordination of the programme is excellent and closely linked with the work of SIOs and the school improvement strategies. There is a high level of involvement of many agencies and therefore the programme benefits from a wide range of contributors to the activities offered. An impressive list of initiatives has been established including homework centres for secondary pupils. The Parents as Educators Scheme has involved 400 parents, including Asian heritage families in learning how to help their children at home in addition to promoting lifelong learning of parents in deprived areas. Homework centres have also been organised in children's homes to embrace the needs of children in public care. The LEA has tracked all secondary pupils using the scheme and GCSE results have improved significantly compared with previously predicted grades.

94. There is an extensive LEA-wide summer programme of 70 academic, sport and recreation activities, built around the requests and suggestions from pupils called the Summer Slam. It also provides good opportunities for young people to access the careers service which also provides workshops on careers related to some of the activities on offer.

Recommendations

In order to raise standards:

- the support for the teaching of literacy and numeracy in secondary schools should be continued;

- support for teaching and learning of ICT in secondary schools and monitor the impact on levels of attainment should be improved; and
- attendance by LEA officers at governing body meetings should provide an effective use of resources.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate planning

95. The strategic management of the LEA is of a high standard. It is impressive that this has been achieved in such a short time, during which central government has made very demanding requirements to produce an extensive range of plans. A community plan has recently been produced which sets the visions and values for 2020. Each year the Council reviews its 'Visions and Values' and this provides a policy context which ensures service plans link to the community plan. The high quality Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) is extensively cross-referenced to all major plans.

96. Education and training is one of 12 departments, each with a director responsible to the chief executive. It is questionable whether it is an appropriate structure for a small LEA. These departments are then organised into 'programme areas', each of which has an executive director with responsibility for strategic co-ordination of the corporate activities of those departments and takes a lead on cross-cutting themes (for instance early years, crime and disorder). The executive directors have neither line management nor operational responsibility for the separate departments, but directors meet regularly under their aegis. Although expensive, these arrangements do lead to a high degree of coherence, consistency and feasibility of corporate and statutory plans.

97. The elected members are very ably supported by the officers and the quality of advice is very good; they are given a range of options when appropriate and the relevant data in order to make an informed choice. The executive director plays a key role in providing a link with members across his areas. However, the corporate structure now sits uneasily alongside the modernised structure of the Council, and there is a variable number of executive members with which each ED liaises. The chief executive-executive director –director structure has the potential to have the director regarded as third tier and lack sufficient status to safeguard the interests of education. This pitfall is avoided because of the high quality of relationships, the evident mutual respect and the strength of the leadership of the education department. It also enables the director to focus on raising standards in schools.

98. A strength of the LEA is the effective collaboration at the corporate level between education and social services, health and the police on individual projects. Liaison with the police has led to effective work and good co-operation over the truancy order, tackling vandalism on school buses and providing support over issues of security to school property. There is appropriate liaison through working groups on the priorities of the crime and disorder strategy. Inter-agency working involving education, social services and health is not always satisfactory at school level as reported in Section five of this report.

99. The political role has been in a state of continuous change, both before and since the LEA was constituted. What shines through as a constant is the determination and drive of elected members to demand improvements. They have been prepared to make difficult and sensitive decisions, for instance, closure of a special school. The new cabinet structure means that decisions are taken swiftly,

although some members report that they feel less involved in the process. The Council has voted to allow members of the public to observe meetings which ensures openness. As reported earlier the scrutiny role is not yet fully developed. The Council is keen to receive views from residents of the borough and have established regular surgeries and a school improvement forum; these are open to allcomers and the forum includes representatives of pupils from schools in the borough.

100. As reported earlier the LEA has been very successful in bidding and winning external funding, and education has been fully integrated into projects. In just a few schools, however, there is initiative overload and this needs to be carefully monitored. Headteachers have been willing to take on the extra work because of the sense of dynamism and excitement that this new LEA has been able to generate.

101. Procedures for implementing and evaluating corporate plans are secure. Each service reports on its performance standards and targets each year in its service plan. These are summarised within the BVPP. Customer satisfaction surveys are carried out by the Council; services within the education department have mounted surveys covering their own areas and acted on the responses. The Council was a pilot for peer review and has been at the vanguard of the Local Government Improvement Project.

102. There is a Council-wide performance management system which is applied rigorously within the education department. Initially the objectives were set in broad terms. However, since the key policy objectives were established in 1999 the process has been strengthened and targets are incorporated into the local performance plan. The Council has made considerable progress in the short span since unitary status commenced.

103. The LEA has embarked on discussion and consultation with community groups on demographic and structural issues in an ethnically diverse society. These are explained in Section 5 of this report.

Management services

104. The management services provided by the Council generally are of good quality, support school improvement and provide choice for schools including information on other providers. The traded services are well managed, have high levels of buyback and were part of the recent national best practice study on contracting for education services and Best Value. The Council intends to improve services further through an innovative private public partnership which will utilise the private sector expertise both through complete outsourcing of some services and joint work in others.

105. There are good quality service plans, and SLAs clearly define costs and service standards and describe a range of levels of service.

106. The finance service provides good quality financial support and advice to schools. School budget statements are very clear. The service provides good benchmarking data and this contributes to the school self-review process. School

budgets are closely monitored. Four-fifths of primary schools carried surpluses of over five per cent in 1999, but this is being successfully challenged by the LEA and school visits demonstrate that schools have been required to report how they propose to use the money. Internal audit is valued by schools. The external auditor is completing a study of school budgets with the aim of identifying further support needed to increase the capacity and effectiveness of schools in managing resources to promote school improvement.

107. The payroll service is provided by a corporate unit. Although generally sound it needs to be improved because a minority of schools experience regular payroll inaccuracies due to weaknesses in the monthly reconciliation with the Council system.

108. The personnel service has been extremely effective in working in many schools closely with governors and Dioceses to effect school improvement.

109. The LEA has been robust in supporting governors and headteachers in progressing competence proceedings where this approach was necessary. Following serious concerns about leadership, eight headteachers and one deputy have been dismissed. Good support has been given to governors, working with dioceses, in appointing acting or associate headteachers and making permanent appointments.

110. A recruitment strategy manager is working to improve recruitment and retention and encourage greater numbers of teachers from ethnic minorities through various strategies such as links with local further education access courses and the graduate teacher scheme.

111. Following a pilot Best Value Review, the personnel team has reorganised to improve its response to casework and now achieves a good balance between providing effective, accurate technical advice and supporting headteachers in their exercise of responsibility. They are developing policies and guidance in new areas such as sickness monitoring and to cover the personnel implications for the delegation of SEN budgets.

112. Support for administrative ICT has more strengths than weaknesses. Administrative and curriculum ICT are appropriately linked within the NGfL and other plans and effective training and technical support is secured for all schools. All schools use and value e-mail, intranet and internet access and will soon benefit from an upgrade to their administrative systems.

113. Electronic exchange of data between the LEA and its schools and other Council departments, is unsatisfactory. Some data is collected twice and other problems are discussed in sections two and five of this report. The Council is attempting to resolve these problems and has drawn up plans which should deliver the required quality of service.

114. The Council secures good premises support to schools, through its own staff and the use of private contractors. Sound technical guidance, including health and safety guidance is provided and advice given to schools managing their own

contractors and works. All schemes, including complex works with tight timetables, have been efficiently project-managed and all have been completed within budget. In contrast the school survey and visits confirmed that the quality of the Council's grounds maintenance service is too variable and should be improved.

Recommendations

In order to improve the quality of strategic planning:

- the role of the executive director should be clarified in the light of changes in the political structure of the Council.

In order to improve the quality of service to schools:

- the reliability and accuracy of the payroll system should be improved; and
- the support for ICT in administration should be improved by remedying weaknesses in the exchange of electronic data between the LEA and its schools.

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION

Strategy

115. The LEA inherited a pattern of provision that was anomalous and too expensive. It has, appropriately, given high priority to an ambitious and comprehensive systemic review of SEN. The LEA has consulted thoroughly and the principles of the future organisation and management of SEN have been agreed and have widespread support. These principles fully reflect the government's programme of action with increased opportunities for parental choice and improved provision for pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools.

116. There is a clear strategy for SEN, which is being implemented according to the LEA's timescales. However, important strategic decisions about how delegation will be implemented and managed are scheduled for completion very late in view of the target date for implementation of April 2001. It has been agreed that funding for learning and behaviour support staff, which is currently managed centrally, will be delegated to schools. Schools recognise that this will provide greater flexibility and increase opportunities for early intervention and provide greater support for pupils at Stage 3 of the SEN Code of Practice. However, schools do not have basic information, which is required in preparation for these changes. The recently circulated SEN handbook only contains information on the existing system. At the time of the inspection, schools have not been consulted on the mechanism through which funding will be delegated. If the LEA is to be successful in rectifying some of the existing inconsistencies in the current allocation of SEN funding, proposals and mechanisms to allocate resources appropriately should be further forward. The intentions about the future of the centrally managed staff and how they may be placed in schools are also unknown. The ways in which schools expenditure and quality of SEN provision will be monitored are also unclear. Schools, while having a high degree of trust in the LEA, rightly express concerns especially when the date for implementation is April 2001. The LEA has recently appointed a senior officer to coordinate the new developments. This will help to provide the capacity to implement the changes speedily and provide the capacity to improve.

117. Provision for pupils with physical disabilities and severe and complex learning difficulties have been sensibly reorganised. Officers are currently seeking ways of providing easy access to at least one mainstream secondary school. Proposals to site Key Stage 1 and 2 pupils with moderate learning difficulties in well resourced bases in two local primary schools are being developed. A consultant and working party are continuing to investigate the most effective way of supporting pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Heads of special schools visited for this inspection are receptive to providing greater opportunities for inclusion and are enthusiastic about playing a full role in supporting these developments. More pupils are being included in primary and secondary schools. However the future role of special schools and the ways in which they can provide support to developments has yet to be clarified.

118. Parents are appropriately consulted and the proposals of the SEN review have been discussed. They receive suitable information on SEN provision but require

more information of the progress of applications for statements of special educational needs.

Statutory obligations

119. The LEA is taking reasonable steps to meet its statutory duties, but there have been serious delays in the completion and amendment of statements.

120. The processing of statements has been too slow. The LEA reports that in 1999/2000 75 per cent of draft statements were completed within the national guideline of 18 weeks, but this contrasts with the actual rate of 13 per cent. The discrepancy arises because in 83 per cent of cases, the necessary documentation from other agencies such as the health authority and social services arrived late, and these are not counted in the LEA figure in accordance with Audit Commission criteria. Inter-agency working in this regard has been unsatisfactory. The LEA recognise this low performance, have taken action and there have been marked improvements in the two months prior to the inspection.

121. Annual reviews and transition plans are conducted although, inappropriately, an LEA representative does not always attend when a statement is being amended. Importantly, 54 statements have been discontinued when evidence has justified this action.

Improvement and value for money

122. Support for SEN in special schools is good. In mainstream schools there are strengths but also some weaknesses. The LEA's support for SEN coordinators is effective and includes regular cluster group meetings, good in-service training and opportunities for more advanced study leading to accredited qualifications in aspects of SEN work. There is a useful accredited training programme for support assistants, which has had a good level of up-take.

123. Support for pupils with statements is currently managed by a central service. The support is satisfactory. The difficulties of effectively managing such a large service combined with inflexibility in the way in which support is deployed are being addressed as part of the SEN review.

124. The educational psychological service has faced difficulties with staffing over the past two years. Schools report the difficulties caused by gaps in staffing and some frequent changes. However, the service is now on a sound foundation and appropriate management steps are being taken to ensure that schools are well supported.

125. Monitoring of schools' SEN provision is variable and intermittent. Most schools report that the SIOs visits and the analysis of pupils' progress at their annual reviews have been helpful, but other schools have received little help. Under the new arrangements proposed by the SEN review the LEA plans to recruit more staff for this process and develop more formal procedures to ensure all schools receive the same level of monitoring for SEN.

Analysis

126. The LEA has no consistent mechanism for ensuring value for money. The findings of this inspection demonstrate that, while there has been considerable consultation, which has helped to identify the direction required to make improvements, currently the services are not providing value for money. The processing of statements is unsatisfactory. The delegation of funding and the allocation of staff from a large centrally managed support staff still have to be resolved in a way which rectifies some of the mismatch between funding allocation and school needs and provides schools with greater flexibility for earlier intervention. Monitoring of school provision for SEN is not consistent.

Recommendations

In order to improve provision and support for special educational needs:

- the LEA action plan for SEN should be brought forward and implemented, and in particular:
 - as a matter of urgency consult with schools on models of allocation of delegated funding and staff deployment;
 - develop criteria and moderation procedures on the basis of which schools needs can be more accurately accessed;
 - devise in consultation with schools appropriate methods of monitoring the provision and effectiveness of SEN; and
- the rate of processing of statements should be improved to a consistently sound standard.

SECTION 5: ACCESS

The supply of school places

127. School admissions and school place planning are well managed and meet all statutory requirements. Plans identify the key areas for development and link these to capital planning and school improvement. The LEA has the capacity to implement them in partnership with dioceses and other local interest groups, and its use of consultation is in the spirit of Best Value.

128. The LEA is effective in forecasting and managing school places. The school population is likely to remain stable for some years, but the growth of the independent Islamic sector impacts on some school intakes.

129. The LEA has successfully reduced surplus places in 2000 to a low level; 5.9 per cent in primary and 6.1 per cent in secondary. There are appropriate plans for those few schools that continue to have a significant surplus. The LEA monitors areas of potential growth and has identified a need to expand junior places in some schools. The LEA has taken appropriate action so that in September 2000 there were no infant classes above 30. This is a much improved position from that on the inception of the LEA when 40 per cent of infant pupils were educated in classes above 30.

130. School reorganisations have been effectively implemented following full consultation. The LEA has acted decisively and closed two special schools and established one new school for pupils with severe learning difficulties. An infant and junior school have amalgamated successfully.

131. The LEA has inherited an unusually high number of separate nursery schools and appropriately proposes a full review of early years provision next year, in the light of the targets for three year olds and the new Foundation stage curriculum.

132. School organisation is a significant structural issue for the LEA, and will be the subject of wide consultation through this year. The School Organisation Plan states that a crucial objective is to meet needs of the minority ethnic community, particularly for secondary schooling. More than half of the schools are voluntary aided. The operation of denominational admissions criteria results in parents from minority ethnic groups having a more limited choice of schools and affects the extent to which other schools can achieve an ethnically diverse pupil population.

133. The existence of so many church schools in an area with a large ethnic minority population is an inherent tension and contributes to the polarisation of school communities. However, a growing number of the church primary schools now have a majority of Islamic pupils, in several over 90 per cent. The LEA has appropriately developed its relationship with the Dioceses, the local Islamic community and the governing bodies of VA schools but further collaboration is needed to achieve a positive resolution to ensure schools do meet all community needs. In particular the one CE secondary school is particularly oversubscribed, and though centrally located continues to serve a wide area and only 72 per cent of its roll is resident in the LEA.

Admissions

134. Admissions is administered well, information is well set out and 93 per cent of parents obtained their first preferences in 2000. The criteria for oversubscribed community schools are objective and achieve their aim to minimise the distance a pupil would have to travel to an alternative school. Last year these criteria were subject to a full review including other options, but this resulted in no change because there was a consensus that the existing criteria provide a fair and objective allocation of places.

135. Appeals are dealt with in a timely manner but the success of appeals, particularly in the voluntary aided sector, has led to classes of 33 in some secondary schools and of 37 and over in some junior schools. Admissions appeals committees require further training to minimise this.

136. The LEA has developed appropriate liaison with neighbouring LEAs, and now administers admissions to voluntary aided schools which ensures greater equity.

Asset Management Planning (AMP)

137. The LEA inherited poor information but through good planning has established a reliable baseline with schools and dioceses. The AMP process has been developed in consultation with schools. Full condition surveys have been completed and shared with all schools and expert consultants engaged to support the programme of suitability and sufficiency surveys. Schools were encouraged to use surplus balances for building improvements and were guided to follow AMP priorities for spending formula capital and seed challenge. Following the example of the dioceses, the LEA plans from next year to require schools to match minor works funding with two years of their own capital. Planning is secure and is the key to improving buildings, but the LEA identifies that implementation requires further funding.

138. The Council has committed its own capital to education and coordinated successful and substantial external bids. Over the past two years £9m capital has been spent and most of the worst buildings and temporary huts have been replaced. Additional Council funding ensured that all the new infant classrooms are permanent buildings that match their environment. Progress in the last two years is very good.

139. The LEA, school and diocese have collaborated effectively to secure capital from the DfEE to build on one site, replacing current unsatisfactory split site provision. The Council is also actively working to develop a broad public finance initiative (PFI) to deliver improved school premises.

Provision of education otherwise than at school

140. Provision is sound which represents good progress since the LEA inheritance was a lack of proper regulation.

141. A PRU unit has been registered with the DfEE recently and its management and staffing structures have been made permanent. The PRU provides full-time

education for pupils of all ages. Pupils who require education otherwise are identified and referred in a timely way. Pupils in Year 11 are offered good opportunities to gain accredited qualifications; in addition to provision at the PRU, those pupils can be offered places at the local college of further education.

142. At over one per cent of the pupil population, the number of pupils requiring education otherwise is reducing but is still too high. Rates of reintegration have been very low; there is still a backlog, and over 30 pupils are out of school for more than one year. The LEA is addressing these difficulties and has made a determined start to implement new procedures. These procedures include making appropriate financial arrangements for deducting and enhancing the school budget when pupils are on the roll of the PRU and when they are reintegrated into school. Pupils can receive support on reintegration, but procedures for dual registration have not yet been devised.

Attendance

143. LEA support to improve attendance is unsatisfactory. There is no strategy to improve attendance included within the Behaviour Support Plan but a priority of the EDP includes activities for improving attendance in primary and secondary schools. The activities are relevant but adopt a piecemeal approach rather than being inter-related to form a coherent strategy. The range of strategies employed to improve attendance is narrow. The LEA progress report on the first year of implementation of the EDP notes that some progress had been made in primary schools but progress was unsatisfactory in secondary schools. Provisional figures for 1999-2000 indicate that the LEA met its targets for primary but not secondary schools.

144. The LEA reviewed the service in 2000 and made a number of changes. Education social workers (ESWs) are deployed to schools on the basis of a clear formula which links deployment to schools' needs in an appropriate way. Some individual social workers provide a good service with a speedy response to referrals supported by a good knowledge of the school and the community it serves. However, this is not consistent and the effectiveness of the service is too variable.

145. A strength of the service is that on referral ESWs make home visits. Appropriate service standards are set to ensure that schools are provided with timely information on the progress. However, the criteria for referral to the service are not clear. Registers are not consistently checked in all schools and as a result the school determines the referrals on the basis of their own perceptions. The schools' strategies for following up absence before referral to the service are not always established clearly enough, although the LEA promotes the use of a system of first day contact. Procedures for monitoring progress of cases vary between individual officers and are sometimes lax. As a result systems are not sufficiently tight to ensure that pupils do not fall through the net.

146. The service is extending its use of legal powers but the number of prosecutions is low. Good collaboration took place with the police and a truancy order was imposed on the town centre. The exercise was successful and demonstrated the extent of absence.

147. An appropriate policy for regulating extended leave to India and Pakistan has been adopted although not all schools visited are clear about its implications. Bilingual school staff who are often funded by EMTAG have been vigorous in discussing with parents the implications on educational attainment. This has been effective and in one or two of the schools visited the numbers of pupils taking extended leave had reduced.

Behaviour support

148. Support for improving behaviour has strengths but also some weaknesses. The LEA has provided good strategic leadership for reducing and monitoring exclusion and good support to schools in the development of in-school centres. However, a coherent continuum of provision aligned to an appropriate strategy is not in place.

149. The Behaviour Support Plan, drafted shortly after the inception of the LEA, provides a useful audit of provision. Appropriate activities within the EDP provide a stimulus to further developments. While several initiatives have had an impact the work is not sufficiently well coordinated within an overall strategy for schools to feel well supported.

150. The LEA has provided challenging leadership that has been successful in encouraging schools to reduce rates of permanent exclusion. The decrease has fluctuated but nevertheless is considerable and well within the target set by the LEA. Exclusion is monitored closely.

151. Two schools visited for this inspection received very effective support from SIOs that monitored teaching and provided teachers with good guidance on appropriate strategies. The anti-bullying forum has made a useful contribution. It links representatives from secondary schools together with other partners to discuss and disseminate ways to combat bullying and incidents of racial harassment.

152. Liaison with the child and adolescent mental health has improved. A good initiative has been taken to second a teacher to provide educational advice on suitable teaching programmes for pupils who are referred. However, support to pupils at Stage 3 of the Code of Practice and for pupils with statements for behaviour problems is insufficient and often unsatisfactory. Some of the models of support are too inflexible to be effective, particularly in secondary schools. The LEA has identified these weaknesses through consultation with its schools. In part they are being considered through the ongoing SEN review and by an elected members' task group.

Gifted and talented

153. The LEA has made a satisfactory start in making provision but there are weaknesses. The LEA collaborated with a local college and the EAZ to run two summer schools in 2000. The LEA was supportive through the SIO. However, specific training was too limited and there were no collaborative meetings between the schools in the planning process.

154. The EDP identifies gifted and talented pupils as a targeted group. The strategy is expanded in the revised EDP for 2000-1, including as a theme in the school improvement programme. Actions identified include the development of accelerated learning in five primary schools in the SRB area, and the continuation of sessions for secondary age pupils at half-terms and during the school holidays. Another initiative entitled Bright Sparks involves one of the secondary schools working with local primary schools on science and technology projects as part of its technology college links with the community. The work of the LEA is being coordinated by an education development manager.

Health, safety, welfare, child protection

155. The LEA's arrangements for protecting children from significant harm are satisfactory. The LEA makes an appropriate contribution to the work of the area child protection committee. There has been good collaboration between the LEA, social services department and the Lancashire Council of Mosques to develop child protection procedures. Lists of designated teachers are maintained and details of their training are monitored.

156. Liaison between education and social services is unsatisfactory at the school level. In response to previous criticisms, there is now a named contact within social services for each secondary school, and this has improved day-to-day communications for these schools. However, schools still cite examples of poor response regarding children potentially at risk. The LEA should investigate these cases to identify gaps in provision. Alternatively, where schools have unrealistic expectations of social services, there is currently no guidance on referral to other relevant services.

Children in public care

157. Strategies for improving the educational attainment of children in public care are sound; they are developed coherently in all appropriate plans. There is evidence of some improvement, but only for those children with provision in the borough; no exclusions since March 2000 and GCSE performance in 2000 exceeded targets. A small 'equal chances' project is funded by social services and provides vigorous and committed support to a number of initiatives. These initiatives provide practical and successful strategies to enhance achievement; including help with homework, provision of books to children's homes and a celebration event. As mentioned elsewhere in this report, the incompatibility of ICT systems, this time between education and the social services department, hinders the collection and sharing of data.

Ethnic minority children

158. Provision for ethnic minority groups has strengths but also some weaknesses.

159. Support for English as an additional language (EAL) is effective and represents good value for money. Delegation of EAL support to schools has been managed well, but the LEA also retains a central support unit. There are good arrangements

for central monitoring and co-ordination of work, training of staff working in schools, for liaison between EAL work and literacy and for the provision of bilingual support assistants. A weakness is that guidance has not been provided to headteachers for the production of action plans or for schools' monitoring of the effectiveness of the funding.

160. At inception, the LEA inherited and has not been able to amend or influence, a pattern of school provision and parental choice which has led to an undesirable degree of ethnic imbalance in its schools. The LEA is affording this issue the high priority it deserves. A good lead has been given by the director and progress has been made in bringing together all interested parties. Strategies have been discussed at senior officer level and the LEA has reached the stage where options are being put to elected members and discussed with partners. Although measurable progress is slow and, as yet, there are no clear outcomes, the LEA has successfully created a climate of mutual understanding of the complex issues involved and a will to resolve matters.

161. The LEA has promoted a good range of strategies to improve the extent to which governing bodies represent the ethnic composition of schools. At the time the LEA was established there were 31 governors of Asian heritage and this has increased to 103. Strategies include sensitive use of publicity, often in community languages, co-option and LEA nominations.

162. Strategies to promote cultural harmony and provide equal opportunities are a priority of the Council; support has recently been strengthened by the appointment of a principal officer. However, schools vary in the extent to which they are able to respond positively to the cultural and religious requirements of different ethnic groups; a concern echoed by parents in response to surveys commissioned by the LEA. These issues are monitored in all schools by SIOs, but not to a consistent standard. Schools were visited in which the LEA had appropriately celebrated good practice in this area. In other schools, however, the LEA had failed to challenge unsatisfactory practice, such as inadequate use of data on the performance of ethnic minority pupils.

163. There is good provision for the small numbers of Traveller children secured through an SLA with Lancashire LEA.

Combating racism

164. The LEA's arrangements to combat racism are sound. Its response to the report of the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence (Macpherson report, 1999) was discussed and agreed with headteachers. Appropriate procedures to monitor racial harassment have been developed. The anti-bullying forum has provided useful opportunities for secondary school staff to discuss strategies that have been successful in tackling racial harassment. The LEA has issued guidance to schools and training is planned for 2001.

Social exclusion

165. On inception the new LEA was faced with many difficult issues. Rates of permanent exclusion were very high. Large numbers of children were educated otherwise than at school in provision which did not have a sufficiently secure foundation. The demographic context combined with the structure of the provision of secondary schools does not promote the natural integration of the major ethnic communities. The LEA has made every attempt to actively tackle these issues and has made good progress in attempting to find solutions. The LEA has fostered some notable projects that have had an impact and has established procedures for performance management, which have the capacity to improve services. It meets the statutory duties for this area of work. Longer-term work is needed to establish coherent framework of policies and embed procedures systematically into working practice.

Recommendations

In order to improve the reintegration of pupils into school:

- the implications and further development of the implementation of new procedures for reintegration should be discussed with schools.

In order to improve support for attendance:

- in consultation with schools, a more detailed framework of procedures should be developed to build greater consistency in the quality and effectiveness of the service. This should include referral criteria, and procedures for monitoring the progress of cases; and
- a broader range of strategies should be devised to improve attendance and plan their gradual implementation.

In order to improve support for behaviour:

- a strategic overview of the continuum of provision for behaviour should be developed, in consultation with schools making clear at each stage the schools responsibilities, the range of strategies which can be employed and criteria for referral to the next stage.

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

- in consultation with schools and the social services department devise clear procedures and protocols should be devised to clarify respective responsibilities, the exchange of information and data; referral and reporting progress; and
- investigate further how liaison between schools and social services can be improved.

In order to promote cultural harmony and improve the attainment of minority ethnic groups:

- in conjunction with headteachers, governors, representatives of the diocese and community organisations continue to discuss and come to some agreements about the appropriate structure of schools for an ethnically diverse society; and
- improve the provision to support schools so that they can confidently tackle issues of cultural harmony and race relations within the curriculum.

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve the strategic planning:

- the links between the policy and review committee and other groups involved in evaluating aspects of school improvement should be clarified, and also whether the process can be further rationalised.

In order to raise standards:

- the support for the teaching of literacy and numeracy in secondary schools should be continued;
- support for teaching and learning of ICT in secondary schools and monitor the impact on levels of attainment should be improved; and
- attendance by LEA officers at governing body meetings should provide an effective use of resources.

In order to improve the quality of strategic planning:

- the role of the executive director should be clarified in the light of changes in the political structure of the Council.

In order to improve the quality of service to schools:

- the reliability and accuracy of the payroll system should be improved; and
- the support for ICT in administration should be improved by remedying weaknesses in the exchange of electronic data between the LEA and its schools.

In order to improve provision and support for special educational needs:

- the LEA action plan for SEN should be brought forward and implemented, and in particular:
 - as a matter of urgency consult with schools on models of allocation of delegated funding and staff deployment;
 - develop criteria and moderation procedures on the basis of which schools needs can be more accurately accessed;
 - devise in consultation with schools appropriate methods of monitoring the provision and effectiveness of SEN; and
- the rate of processing of statements should be improved to a consistently sound standard.

In order to improve the reintegration of pupils into school:

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

Tel: 0207 421 6800

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