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IN EDUCATION

INSPECTION OF

BEXLEY

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,* which focuses on the effectiveness of local education authority (LEA) work to support school improvement. The inspection also took account of the Local Government Act 1999 insofar as it relates to the work undertaken by the LEA on Best Value.

2. The inspection was partly based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA; on school inspection information and audit reports; on documentation and discussions with LEA members, council staff, headteachers and governors, representation from the dioceses and other partners. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on aspects of the LEA's work was circulated to all schools. The overall response rate was 85 per cent.

3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to eight primary schools, one infant school, one junior school, five secondary schools, one special school and two pupil referral units. These visits tested the views of governors, headteachers and other staff on the key aspects of the LEA's strategy. The visits also considered whether the support which is provided by the LEA contributes to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in schools and provides value for money. Further evidence was considered from the inspection of the literacy and numeracy strategies in another 11 primary schools.

COMMENTARY

4.   Bexley is primarily a residential Borough on the border of Greater London and Kent. Although covering a small area, it is densely populated with well-defined communities and small pockets of local industry. Although there is general prosperity in the south, individual wards have high levels of unemployment and three quarters have a low percentage of adults with higher qualifications. There is a complex arrangement for schooling in the secondary sector due to selection and a diverse range of schools; about 20 per cent of pupils live outside of the borough, mainly in one neighbouring LEA.

5.   The performance of pupils, and the rate of improvement, is overall about the national average in primary schools and post-16. A significant number of pupils from other LEAs are attracted to Bexley secondary schools, and attainment on entry is above average. Pupils' performance and the rate of improvement at Key Stages 3 and 4 are above average, but progress is not as good as that found nationally.

6.   Strengths outweigh weaknesses, and support for the majority of functions is satisfactory, although impact is greater in primary and special schools than in the secondary sector. Statutory targets are appropriately challenging, but the LEA does not challenge its secondary schools well enough to ensure continuous improvement. High priority is given to education, but the funding made available to schools does not adequately reflect this. Good quality planning, good corporate arrangements for achieving Best Value, and sound frameworks and procedures for school improvement characterise the LEA. Work with partners is a considerable strength, as is the general good quality of services to parents. Bexley LEA has particular strengths in the following:

- support for literacy;
- support to governors;
- the clarity, consistency and feasibility of corporate plans;
- the quality of advice received by elected members;
- collaboration with partners;
- meeting statutory obligations for special educational provision;
- admissions to school; and
- provision for pupils who have no school place.

7.   The Education Development Plan (EDP) is well constructed and firmly linked to other key plans, but it has not been given a sufficiently high profile as the key document for driving improvement. Progress in implementing the EDP is overall satisfactory, and in some areas good, although actions have been more successful in primary schools. The LEA's provision and analysis of performance data is good; overall, its use by schools is satisfactory. Support for numeracy is satisfactory, and a good start has been made with the strategy at Key Stage 3. Support for schools causing concern is satisfactory; the time taken to bring about improvement is reducing. A sound strategy for leadership and management support is in place. There are some good features in the LEA's support for early years education.

Management services provide an overall satisfactory infrastructure for schools. Pupils with special educational needs receive satisfactory support, and the criteria and arrangements for statutory assessment are effective. Access to education is overall sound, as is support for attendance, but levels of exclusions are too high. Measures to combat social exclusion are satisfactory.

Weaknesses lie in:

- the quality of the former leadership given by elected members;
- the implementation of monitoring, challenge, intervention and support in some schools;
- support for information and communication technology (ICT) in the curriculum and in school administration; and
- support for pupils' behaviour management.

8.   Political leadership of education has not been sufficiently strong and elected members have not had the confidence of schools. However, new corporate governance arrangements have been well used to review their responsibilities and have created some optimism for change. Provision for 16 -19 education in schools is in urgent need of rationalisation, and a member-led post-16 working group has been recently established.

9.   The LEA has not been successful in creating a strong and co-operative partnership with all its schools with the result that there is some absence of collective responsibility and a lack of shared vision and values. Financial decision making in particular has engendered a degree of mistrust from schools. In spite of good systems and procedures for behaviour support, there is little common acceptance across all secondary schools that issues can only be resolved by joint action between themselves and the LEA.

10.   The LEA has the capacity to improve and to address the recommendations in this report. In many areas it is already aware of what needs to be done and has prepared the ground for a fundamental Best Value review of education services. However, the biggest challenge will be to establish a collective sense of identity and shared goals with schools through engaging them in a dialogue for continuous improvement. This must be two-way, and schools themselves will need to demonstrate a commitment to improved partnership.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

11.   Bexley is primarily a residential borough on the border of Greater London and Kent. Although covering a small area, it is densely populated with well defined communities and small pockets of local industry. The LEA scores are average on the index of local deprivation, and eighty eight per cent of families are owner-occupiers. Individual wards have high levels of unemployment and three quarters have a low percentage of adults with higher qualifications. The borough has an estimated school-age population of 38,400 pupils.

12.   The proportion of primary pupils eligible for free school meals (16 per cent) is broadly in line with the national figure (20 per cent), as is the secondary figure (14 per cent, compared with 18 per cent). The percentage of pupils from minority ethnic groups (9.5 per cent), is broadly in line with the national figure of 12 per cent. Six per cent of pupils have English as an additional language.

13.   The borough maintains 63 schools in the primary phase (49 primary, seven infant and seven junior), of which two are Foundation schools. There are 16 secondary schools (four grammar, one bilateral school admitting pupils into a selective stream, three Catholic comprehensive, one Church of England non-selective, and seven non-selective community schools), of which two are Foundation schools. Secondary schools include one boys' and one girls' selective school, one boys' and one girls' Catholic comprehensive school and one boys' and one girls' all ability school. Ten primary and four secondary schools are voluntary aided, and two primary schools are voluntary controlled. There are sixth forms in 13 out of 16 schools. At secondary level, about 20 per cent of pupils live outside of the Borough, mainly in one neighbouring LEA. Of the five special schools, there is one primary and one secondary school for pupils with severe learning difficulties (SLD), one all-age school for pupils with moderate learning difficulties (MLD), and one primary and one secondary school for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD). There is one primary and one secondary pupil referral unit (PRU). Two primary schools and one secondary school have been awarded Beacon status.

14.   The proportions of pupils with statements of special educational need are 2.5 per cent in primary schools and 2.9 per cent in secondary schools. This is broadly in line with the national figure of 2.7 per cent for primary schools, and below the national average of 4.0 for secondary schools.

15.   Sufficient nursery places are available for all four-year-olds, and 93 per cent are on the roll of maintained schools. Currently, 46 per cent of three year olds are in maintained provision, and a further 44 per cent are provided for in settings that are part of the Early Years Partnership.

Performance

16.	Schools' OFSTED inspection reports show attainment on entry to primary schools to be broadly in line with that found nationally and in similar LEAs. These reports also indicate the percentage of higher attaining pupils entering secondary schools as above the national figure, and broadly in line with similar LEAs.

17.	Standards are broadly in line with national averages at Key Stages 1 and 2, but are not high enough in Key Stages 3 and 4. In 2000, the percentage of pupils achieving Level 2 and above in the Key Stage 1 tests was broadly in line with the national average and that of statistical neighbours. At Key Stage 2, the percentage of pupils achieving Level 4 and above in English was above the national average and in line with statistical neighbours' figures. Although results for both mathematics and science were in line with national and statistical neighbour averages at Level 4 and above, results in science have fluctuated from below, to in line with these averages over the past six years. Results in English and mathematics were in line with national and statistical neighbours figures at Level 5 and above, but in science results have been consistently below the national average and that of statistical neighbours.

18.	At Key Stage 3 in 2000, the percentage of pupils achieving Level 5 and above in English was above the national average, and in line with that of statistical neighbours. In mathematics and science, results were broadly in line with national and statistical neighbour averages.

19.	At Key Stage 4 in 2000, the percentage of pupils achieving five or more A*-C grades and one or more A*- G grades was broadly in line with national and statistical neighbours' averages. The average GCSE point score was broadly in line with the national average and that of similar authorities.

20.	In 2000, at age 18, average A-level and advanced GNVQ points scores were in line with the national and statistical neighbours' average.

21.	At Key Stage 1, the rate of improvement is below the national trend. At Key Stage 2, improvement is below the national trend in mathematics, in line with this in English, and above in science. At Key Stage 3, improvement is broadly in line with the national trend in English and mathematics, but below this in science. At GCSE and A-level, rates of improvement over the last five years are broadly in line with the national trend, but overall well below the trend in similar LEAs.

22.	OFSTED evidence from school inspections indicates that progress made by pupils in secondary schools is not as good as that found nationally, nor in similar authorities. The proportion of higher attaining pupils entering secondary schools is above the national figure by five per cent; Level 6 performance in English at Key Stage 3 is above the national figure by six per cent, but performance in mathematics and science is only in line with national results. In 2000, aggregate Key Stage 3

results for English, mathematics and science indicate that the overall performance of schools is below that of statistical neighbours. At Key Stage 4 in 2000, an analysis of results for pupils gaining five or more A*-C grades at GCSE shows a similar picture.

23.   School inspection data collected in 2000, shows that the percentage of overall good and very good primary schools (71 per cent) is in line with the national average (70 per cent) and that of statistical neighbours (72 per cent). The figure for the seven secondary schools inspected (50 per cent) is below the national average and that of statistical neighbours (both 66 per cent).

24.   Since 1993, two primary and two secondary schools have been judged to require special measures. One primary and one secondary school were removed from this category within the required timescales. The other two schools are part-way through the expected timescale for removal, but in spite of considerable efforts the secondary school remains a cause for concern. In addition, since 1997, three primary schools have been identified as having serious weaknesses. These weaknesses were resolved in two schools; those in the third are being addressed within the expected timescale. In 2000, one primary school was identified by OFSTED as underachieving. Nine primary schools are currently causing concern to the LEA; at the time of the inspection no secondary schools had been identified in this category.

25.   In 1999/2000, the rate of permanent exclusions was well above the national figure for primary schools (0.8 compared with 0.3); all pupils excluded were boys. The rate of permanent exclusions from secondary schools was broadly in line with the national figure (2.6 compared with 2.8), although the LEA's latest figures show a significant increase. Attendance, and levels of unauthorised absence in primary schools, were broadly in line with national figures. Attendance is below the national figure for secondary schools; the level of unauthorised absence is broadly in line with the national figure.

Funding

26.   Bexley's Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) per pupil for education of £3,058 is above average for all English authorities (£2,958) and for statistical neighbours (£2,971), but below average for Outer London Boroughs (£3,349). The council's spending on education in 2001/2002 is £2.5 million (m) short of the SSA. Spending on social services is £6.3 m above its SSA. The table below shows trends in education spending over time.

	SSA for Education (£000)	Education budget (£000)	Budget as % of SSA
1998/99	100,249	96,841	96.6%
1999/00	105,873	102,610	96.9%
2000/01	112,357	109,289	97.3%
2001/02	119,977	117,457	97.9%

Source: LEA

27.   The gap between SSA and spending is closing, but very slowly. The council's Education Funding Policy for 2001 makes a commitment to identifying opportunities to increase school budgets above the levels of the SSA increase, but it does not make a firm commitment to fully pass on the SSA within a defined timescale. The council has a long-standing track record of passing on increases in the SSA to schools and of funding increases in pupil numbers, pay, and inflation fully. It has taken initiative in seeking increases in funding and has made representations to government about grant funding. However, changes in the mechanism for calculating government grants in 2001/02 has resulted in a settlement that was significantly below the figure on which the council had planned, and Council Tax was increased to cover the loss.

28.   Capital expenditure from revenue for 2000/01 was £21 per pupil. This is below the average for all English authorities (£28) but above the average for Outer London boroughs (£18) and for statistical neighbours (£13). New Deal for Schools money has increased considerably this year. At £77 per pupil it is the same as the average for English LEAs but below the Outer London average (£81) and the statistical neighbours' average (£78). Since 1997, £20m gained from the sale of council houses has been invested in secondary school places to meet substantial growth in the number of secondary aged pupils. Overall, total capital expenditure for 2000/2001 was high.

29.   Bexley has been awarded a £37m Private Finance Initiative (PFI) scheme to provide improvements in two secondary schools. A considerable level of Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funding has been attracted to tackle social exclusion both within schools and in the community.   Developments are focused on the localities of Thamesmead and Belvedere. The development of a City Academy in place of Thamesmead Community College is likely to attract up to £20m of funding.

30.   Overall, grants received are below average, reflecting the overall below average assessment of need for grant funding. The gross standards fund of £141 per pupil is therefore relatively low compared to the averages for English authorities (£210), Outer London boroughs (£197) and statistical neighbours (£160). The council provided full matched funding for Standards Fund, Sure Start and neighbourhood nurseries, thus maximising the level of resources available.

Council structure

31. In May 2001, Bexley council agreed a new constitution of corporate governance, through a leader and cabinet system. This change has been well used by members as an opportunity to review management responsibilities and information provision, with an overriding aim for transparent, efficient and more open, accountable and consultative decision-making.

32. The council is composed of 62 Councillors, and is under Conservative control. The cabinet comprises the leader and seven other elected members, two of whom hold overlapping portfolios for lifelong learning and leisure, one of the council's four main portfolios; although this is a shared responsibility, strategic and operational accountabilities are clear. Four review committees, one of which is lifelong learning and leisure, mirror cabinet portfolios and report to the full council. Terms of reference are appropriate.

33. Four regulatory committees manage non-executive functions, and six community forums act as community consultative groups. A governor appointments working group appoints, allocates and advises on support for LEA governors. An education joint consultative council, chaired by a portfolio holder for education, serves as a forum for education conditions of service and can recommend improvements to the cabinet. Appropriate codes and protocols are in place, and the code of conduct governing the relationship between officers and members is appropriately overseen by a standards committee.

34. The director of education and leisure services is a member of the management board, which oversees the corporate and strategic policies of the council and is the main advisory mechanism for the new cabinet process.

The Education Development Plan

35. The EDP is a sound document with few areas of weakness. It clearly addresses national issues and to a large extent, local needs. The plan is firmly linked to the council's medium term objectives through the Best Value action plan; good linkage is made with other key plans including the council's regeneration strategy and the Early Years Development and Childcare Plan (EYDCP), behaviour support plan (BSP), special educational needs (SEN) and Quality Protects plans. Priorities have been identified through a thorough analysis of information from schools and about the local community. They aim to:

- raise educational expectations;
- secure professional development to enhance and support teaching, management and leadership of schools;
- raise the levels of attainment and progress of all pupils;

- improve the literacy and numeracy skills of children and young people;
- improve the use of ICT to support teaching and learning;
- improve the personal development and employment skills of young people; and
- develop and implement strategies for the LEA monitoring of schools and to support self-review and evaluation.

36.   Priorities and activities are clearly linked, actions relating to national priorities are well targeted, and responsibilities are clear. Success criteria enable actions to be evaluated for impact, and monitoring strategies are well aligned to planned outcomes. Interim timescales for the completion of actions enables effective service management, as well as linkages to be made across activities as priorities are progressed. Resources are clearly linked to priorities, and costings are feasible.

37.   Consultation on the original plan was thorough and included schools, governors, Bexley residents, parents and a number of significant education partners. Each secondary school was visited by a headteacher seconded for this purpose. However, despite consultation leading to a number of significant revisions, schools are mixed in their views and some cite this as a 'paper exercise' with insufficient dialogue and discussion.

38.   Primary and special schools agree that priorities provide a broad steer for school development planning, but secondary schools regard the EDP as having little relevance to their improvement agenda, particularly in promoting inclusion, managing behaviour and developing procedures for effective self-review. Actions within activities are broadly appropriate to secure school improvement in both phases, but these have not been communicated well enough to enable secondary schools to establish strong links with the plan. This lack of clarity therefore leaves them rightly critical.

39.   Statutory targets have been set using a good range of data, including an analysis of the rate of pupil progress between key stages. However, it is a weakness that the plan does not include whole-LEA targets for higher attaining pupils, although a number of schools set these.

Recommendation

Improve the EDP by:

Consulting with primary and secondary schools on ways to establish LEA targets for higher attaining pupils.

Progress in implementing the Education Development Plan

40.   Progress in implementing the EDP is overall satisfactory and in some areas, good. There is considerable evidence of successful outcomes, particularly in

literacy, numeracy, science at Key Stage 2, and work with partners. However, actions have had more limited impact in secondary schools.

41.   Procedures for the regular checking of progress are very thorough. This has resulted in a well considered and sharp analysis of activities needed to effect further improvement. In particular, actions have been well adjusted to take account of raising educational expectations, the dissemination of effective practice and school self-review. A review and development group of senior officers effectively monitors the progress of the overall plan and reports to members.

42.   There is a strong commitment to meeting appropriately challenging targets for literacy and numeracy. A high rate of improvement is needed in literacy and given the good level of support to schools, this should be achieved. Officers are more confident than schools about achieving the 2002 numeracy target, and provide strong and well targeted support. Higher grade GCSE targets are likely to be exceeded, given that results for 2000 were only two percentage points below the 2002 target. The GCSE A* - G target is realistic, appropriate, and should be achieved. The LEA has sensibly reduced the average points score target for 2002 by two, from 44 to 42, as this was inappropriately high. In line with the relaxation nationally on exclusions, the number of permanent exclusions is likely to exceed the 2002 target of 45, despite a more rapid and effective support service for pupils. Unauthorised absence targets are likely to be met in primary schools. The target in secondary schools is unrealistic, owing to a clerical error, and should be revised. The target of 65 per cent one or more GCSE/GNVQ qualification for pupils in public care is likely to be met as support for this group has now improved.

Recommendation

Improve the EDP by:

- Making explicit to schools
-       how the EDP links with other key plans;
-       the detail of actions within activities;
-       the links between actions; and
-       how actions are intended to support all schools in promoting inclusion, managing behaviour and developing effective self-review procedures.

The Allocation of Resources to Priorities

43.   The allocation of resources to priorities is satisfactory overall and strengths outweigh weaknesses. Whilst a high proportion of financial resources is delegated to schools, the level of funding does not adequately reflect the priority the council places on education. Funding for the five to fifteen age range is much lower than in similar authorities.

44.   The council's Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) brings together key priorities into a strong framework which encompasses statutory plans and local priorities, and the education budget is based on a comprehensive business planning process. Service budgets are monitored effectively. Strategic management costs for 2000/2001 at £87 per pupil were below average when compared with for all English authorities (£104), Outer London boroughs (£101) and statistical neighbours (£98). However, spending on the core statutory and regulatory duties per pupil at £59 per pupil was similar to the Outer London boroughs' average (£58) but above the averages for all English authorities (£50) and statistical neighbours (£49). In the drive to increase delegation, central costs have been further reduced following a restructuring of education services. Staffing levels are sufficient for the authority to deliver its key strategic objectives, but long-term vacancies in ICT, and two link adviser vacancies are having an adverse impact.

45.   The level of delegation to schools is higher than average - almost 87 per cent compared to the government target of 85 per cent. However, funding per pupil passed to schools via the Individual Schools Budget (ISB) is well below the comparable averages. Schools receive £112 per pupil less than statistical neighbours at primary age, and £114 less at secondary age.

2000/01 Individual cchools budget: Per pupil	Bexley	Statistical Neighbours	England	Outer London boroughs
Primary	1,753	1,865	1,869	2,024
Secondary	2,499	2,613	2,559	2,746
Special	8,221	9,391	9,357	10,588

Source CIPFA

46.   Early years provision is an important priority, especially in the more socially disadvantaged areas of the borough. The distribution of funding via the funding formula favours Key Stage 4 and sixth forms, but some sixth forms are too small to be financially viable. However, the weightings in the formula have been adjusted over time to begin to bring the LEA more closely in line with other authorities for primary and Key Stage 3 funding. Funding for small primary schools has been increased. Few schools have significant deficits but about one third of primary and secondary schools and most special schools have a budget surplus of greater than five per cent. The LEA actively monitors school surpluses and deficits and requires schools to report on the use of surplus balances of above five per cent.

47.   The funding formula includes factors for special educational needs, social/economic disadvantage and roll turbulence. The underpinning rationale is insufficiently understood by schools. At secondary level where the diversity of needs in schools is greatest, an unusually high proportion of funding is distributed by age weighted pupil unit, especially when compared with other London boroughs. Meeting the starkly contrasting needs between the more prosperous parts of Bexley and the areas of high social and economic deprivation is beyond the capability of

what can be presently achieved through the funding formula. The development of the City Academy in Thamesmead and effectively targeted Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funding go some way toward enhancing the council's ability to combat social exclusion and direct resources to the greatest areas of need. In addition, Standards Fund allocations for social exclusion focus resources toward high need. A relatively high proportion of funding is spent on behaviour support and referral units.

48.   Consultation on the planning and review of the budget has weaknesses. Schools feel that the school funding formula is not sufficiently clear, and that they are not adequately consulted during the planning and review of the annual budget. Structures presently in place have the potential for effective consultation and communication; these include the Fair Funding headteacher and officer group, termly meetings of headteachers and chairs of governing bodies, the recently established governor forum, and executive meetings of representative headteachers from secondary, primary and special schools. The Fair Funding scheme is reviewed annually and includes a review of the formula itself. Budget proposals and consultative documents are circulated to schools. Structures are sound, but the perception of some schools, of an insufficiently developed partnership with the council, has inhibited the effectiveness of these arrangements. A worrying division remains between members' and officers', and schools' understanding of funding issues. Closing the gap between the LEA's and schools' understanding of these issues will be a major step forward in creating an improved partnership.

Recommendation
Improve the allocation of resources to priorities by:
• Instituting, in consultation with schools, a full review of education spending, including the funding formula for schools, with the aim of ensuring the legitimate needs of schools are better met;   • developing a shared and clear understanding between the authority, headteachers and governors of: -   the process and rationale for agreeing priorities and for allocating resources to them; and   -   the form that partnership needs to take in order to achieve effective consultation related to budget making and review.

Best Value

49.   The council's arrangements for Best Value are good and fully integrated into its approach to planning and review; implementation is satisfactory. The Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) outlines a comprehensive review programme with a good balance of national and local priorities, and is effective in bringing together aims, actions, outcomes and performance indicators. However, action plans have yet to be fully incorporated into overall planning. The external auditor's review of the preparation and publication of the BVPP has confirmed full compliance with

statutory requirements. Most education services operate with due regard to Best Value principles, but overall quality assurance is insufficiently robust in management services in particular.

50.   Best Value reviews are centrally managed from within the chief executive's office. This has secured continuity, enabling the council to refine how it conducts reviews, and improving levels of consultation with the people of Bexley. Initially, the council adopted a primarily service-based approach to reviews, but more recently these have become more user-focused and cross-service. A fundamental review of education services has been sensibly timed to follow this inspection and to incorporate the Innovative Approaches to Service Delivery Initiative. This large-scale review will engage headteachers and governors in the best arrangements for the future discharge of the council's education role and responsibilities.

51.   The Best Value process is undertaken with rigour; consultation is robust and there is a strong user focus, which includes consulting with pupils. Comparison with other local authorities and providers is thorough. Reviews have fundamentally challenged whether services should be provided at all, and competition including alternative options has been dealt with appropriately. The approach has not been overly burdensome and has led to a number of tangible improvements and gains in efficiency.

52.   School visits indicate a varied understanding of Best Value principles and their significance and most schools have made little progress in putting Best Value principles into practice. The LEA is at an early stage in engaging schools in evaluating services or comparing cost and quality.

53.   Reports of education Best Value reviews in pupil and student support services, school cleaning and school caretaking inspected as part of this LEA inspection are appended to this report. Reviews were rigorously conducted and actions focused on improving the quality and efficiency of services. The selection of best value reviews was apt in relation to local issues and concerns and important for ensuring good services to schools following increased delegation. The reviews were manageable and worthwhile.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Implications of other functions

54.   The LEA provides satisfactory support for school improvement overall; it is sound in primary and special schools but the challenge for improvement is not sufficiently rigorous in secondary schools. Work with partners is a considerable strength. Support is underpinned by an Education Development Plan (EDP) which identifies appropriate activities in line with national priorities and local needs. Support for curriculum Information and Communications Technology (ICT), although improving, is not contributing sufficiently to school improvement.

55.   Management services provide an overall satisfactory infrastructure for schools, and there are significant strengths in support for personnel. ICT in school administration is unsatisfactory and impedes electronic communication.

56.   Pupils with special educational needs receive satisfactory support. Access to education is overall sound, as is support for attendance, although support for behaviour is unsatisfactory because levels of exclusions are too high. Provision for pupils with no school place is good. Measures to combat social exclusion are satisfactory.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention, support

57.   Procedures for monitoring, challenge, intervention and support are in line with the Code of Practice. Implementation is satisfactory for 'secure' schools, but unsatisfactory for primary schools that have not been identified as a cause for concern, but are struggling to improve. Moreover, despite good value-added data on pupil progress, the LEA does not challenge its secondary schools well enough. In 2001, seven out of 16 secondary schools set targets below the range proposed by the LEA; targets in a further four schools were in line with the minimum figure in this range.

58.   The LEA's school improvement strategy is rightly underpinned by an expectation of schools as self-managing and autonomous, and is sensibly directed at helping schools to help themselves. In order to assume a 'light touch' approach, the key elements of the strategy comprise support for school self-review, and the provision of good quality data, with assurance of effective use. Schools understand and agree with these priorities. However, the LEA has over-estimated the degree to which all schools are effective in self-review and in the use of performance data, and support has been withdrawn too quickly for some.

59.   The LEA has acted appropriately in differentiating the amount of direct monitoring visits to schools. However, evidence from school visits indicates that target setting visits by link advisers to some schools not identified as causing

concern, are too focused on a discussion about numbers. A sufficiently probing dialogue on data analysis and data use, school self-review procedures or improvement strategies has not always occurred where this has been most needed.

Recommendation

Improve challenge and support where this is needed by:

- Ensuring that 'strategies for improvement' are discussed at target setting meetings with link advisers.

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60.   Intervention in indirect proportion to success is mainly determined through data analysis and support for schools overall is targeted to those in greatest need. Link advisers monitor schools' performance and update records termly to take account of significant contacts. Intervention is triggered primarily through low attainment, failure to set or meet challenging targets, and slow progress in addressing key issues identified through external inspections. No systematic use is made of any self-review activities that schools may have undertaken unless these have involved link advisers. This limits the LEA's knowledge of its less secure schools.

Recommendation

Improve monitoring, challenge, intervention and support for less secure schools by:

- Rigorously quality assuring self-review procedures; and
- providing additional support where self-review procedures are not sufficiently robust, outcomes from data analysis are not sufficiently analytical and improvement strategies are not sufficiently well targeted.

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61.   Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support are satisfactory where schools are identified as causing concern. Written communications to headteachers and chairs of governors are detailed, and areas for improvement are clearly indicated. If a school does not make sufficient progress following additional support, the LEA's legal powers are then appropriately triggered.

62.   A review and development group of senior officers, chaired by the director of education, regularly monitors the progress of all schools, including those causing concern, through detailed reports from officers.

Services deployed to support school improvement

63.   Leadership of services is satisfactory and strengths outweigh weaknesses. Although sound planning frameworks are in place through the Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) and the Education Development Plan (EDP), schools are

not unreasonable in their view that the LEA's vision and values for school improvement are not sufficiently well communicated. The recently restructured directorate, comprising the director and four assistant directors, responsible for school effectiveness, children and student services, community education and planning and resources, provides a good structure for coherent and co-ordinated action and for the effective targeting of resources. As the two newly appointed assistant directors assume their responsibilities, it will be crucial for the directorate to gain the confidence of schools through strong consultation and effective communication in line with overarching plans.

64.   Services to schools are appropriately deployed against priorities outlined in the EDP, which provides a well structured and shared sense of direction and establishes clear objectives for service delivery. Communication between services and officers is good, and there is a good level of shared knowledge about work in schools, particularly through the review and development group, membership of focus groups, and from informal networking. The clear understanding of most officers of the inter-relationship of actions and activities for school improvement outlined in plans are not sufficiently well shared with schools.

65.   Primary schools are broadly satisfied with the sufficiency and effectiveness of overall service provision, but secondary schools are not persuaded that this is effective in promoting school improvement and as a result, actively seek support from amongst themselves or from external providers. Link advisers are deservedly well respected and valued in most primary and special schools; however, there is variation within the team in the extent to which advisers offer advice to schools in re-appraising approaches to curriculum and school management. Secondary schools are divided in their view of effectiveness, but there is strong and justifiable criticism of the lack of challenge from advisers, a lack of creative thinking on leadership and management, specifically curriculum management, and unsatisfactory regard to networking schools and to an active brokerage function. Vacancies within the team have compounded this situation. Headteachers in both primary and secondary schools are rightly concerned that improvement is too focused on target-setting alone, with insufficient opportunity for a critical appraisal of school organisation. The link adviser role is regularly discussed with schools, but the last formal review was in 1999.

Recommendation

Improve services deployed to support school improvement by:

*   Undertaking a formal annual review and evaluation of the role and function of the link adviser.

66.   Performance in all services is regularly and systematically evaluated through a good performance management system in line with service objectives, and good regard is given to professional development based on required competencies. The

quality of service delivery is taken seriously and procedures for quality assurance are in place, but these are not sufficiently well aligned to the views of service users. Schools are critical of an inconsistency of support from within the service.

67.   The School Review and Improvement Team (SRI) currently comprises four link advisers, out of a full complement of six, who have direct responsibility for monitoring the progress of schools, and literacy and numeracy consultants. A partner team, the Professional Development and Support Service, comprises five School Development Officers, advisory teachers, and other advisory staff. This team complements the work of the SRI team through the provision of leadership and professional development programmes and advice and support on school management and curriculum development. Strategic and operational links between the two teams are strong. The number of advisory staff is relatively, although not inappropriately, small, limiting the pool of specialist expertise, but in addition to a phase or subject specialism each officer has a curriculum or aspect point of reference. The LEA has a list of independent consultants, some of whom have been well used to progress activities within the EDP; but this list is not known by schools, who are critical of the LEA in not assuming an active brokerage role. Deployment is appropriately linked to service priorities and workloads are well monitored, but the two vacancies in the SRI team have left it over-stretched.

68.   Officers take part in external inspections of schools and many have considerable senior management expertise in primary schools, albeit not recent. Experience of senior management in secondary schools is very limited. There are plans to strengthen this, and additional support is sensibly brokered, for example, a seconded headteacher used to consult with secondary schools on their needs for the EDP. Nevertheless, secondary schools remain dissatisfied with the range of expertise available to them.

Recommendation

Improve services deployed to support school improvement by:

- Consulting with secondary schools to identify the range and nature of expertise currently required to effect school improvement; and
- devising a shared directory of quality-assured providers in liaison with primary, secondary and special schools.

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69.   Services to support school improvement provide satisfactory value for money in primary and special schools but impact is too variable in secondary schools. Best Value principles underpin service provision, costs are reasonable, and there are few areas of major weakness.

Collection and analysis of data

70.   The LEA's provision and analysis of performance data is good. Overall, its use by schools is satisfactory. A data profile received by each school enables them to undertake suitable performance comparisons with groups of similar schools both within and beyond the LEA; this is supported by helpful guidance on data interpretation. This also contains value added data which enables schools to track the performance of individuals and groups of pupils between key stages. However, the LEA's decision to use its own baseline test, for which there are no national comparators, means that primary schools have only local benchmarks with which to compare the attainments of their youngest pupils.

71.   Numerical and graphical information is clearly presented and accessible. Both primary and secondary schools report a high level of satisfaction with both the data and their presentation, though secondary schools on the whole find it less useful than primary schools, partly because there is inevitable overlap with data provided in the autumn package, and partly because the small number of comparable secondary schools in Bexley limits the reliability of local benchmarks. The LEA makes every effort to compensate for this through collaboration with nearby LEAs.

72.   School visits indicate wide variation in the use of performance information. Some schools recognise data as key elements in their self-review strategy and use them effectively to support school improvement, but for others data use is limited to target setting. The LEA has provided training and guidance on the use of performance information, but this has not been fully effective. This is a weakness as effective data use is a central feature of the LEA's view of school autonomy.

73.   The LEA has used school-level data effectively to identify a high proportion of pupils of all abilities not making sufficient progress at Key Stage 3. This has led to discussions with secondary schools about improvement. Both schools and the LEA use performance data mainly for target setting at Key Stages 2 and 4. This process is central to the autumn term link adviser visit to each school, when the target range suggested by the LEA is compared with the school's suggested target. Unless convincing reasons are put forward, the LEA's target is adopted. Some schools consider that the process does not take sufficient account of their circumstances, for example changes in pupil cohorts, presents an unrealistic challenge, and is driven by statistical rather than educational considerations. Since the LEA does not collect the results of optional tests, which are used by many schools, the information that the school has about pupil progress is likely to be more recent than that contained in the LEA database. However, experience has shown that even where the school regards the LEA target as unrealistically challenging, the results achieved have more often than not been higher than the school's prediction, and frequently as high as, if not higher than the LEA's target. This indicates that even though the process may not be regarded favourably by all schools, the LEA is achieving success in challenging its schools to improve their performance.

74. The LEA encourages schools where a very high proportion of pupils attain the national target levels, to set higher level targets. Many primary schools are setting additional targets for Level 5 performance at Key Stage 2 and some selective secondary schools are setting targets for Level 6 and above at Key Stage 3 and for the percentage of pupils attaining 5 or more A* and A grades at GCSE.

Support for Literacy

75. Support for literacy in primary schools is good, and a promising though uneven start has been made in secondary schools. Primary schools in particular value the quality of advice and help they receive, more than three quarters of those responding to the school survey rating it as good or very good.

76. In recent years English results at the end of Key Stages 2 and 3 have been slightly above the national average and in line with the average for similar LEAs. While the target set for Key Stage 2 in 2000 was exceeded, provisional results for 2001 indicate that the LEA has not achieved this target although there has been a gain from the previous year. The target for 2002 is ambitious and a high rate of improvement will be needed to achieve it.

77. The primary literacy strategy is well led and managed and is being implemented effectively. Clear criteria, reflecting performance in English, are used to identify schools for different levels of support; this is suitably differentiated according to need. Unless there are compelling reasons for not doing so, schools causing concern are automatically included in the intensive support category. Test results demonstrate that schools receiving intensive and semi-intensive support have improved their performance in English at approximately double the rate of other schools in the LEA.

78. Consultants work closely with link advisers and with literacy co-ordinators in schools. They make good use of detailed performance data to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of different aspects of their work, and effectively target training and support to tackle weaknesses. Demonstration lessons constitute a central feature of the strategy and these are both effective and valued by teachers. Regular meetings for literacy co-ordinators are effective and training is of good quality; visits to schools showed that both are valued by the majority of teachers. Good support is provided for the significant number of teachers newly arrived from overseas, and a support 'surgery' is valued by teachers and is proving highly cost effective.

79. Towards the end of Key Stage 2, there are conflicting demands in the work done in English between the requirements of the tests used to select pupils for secondary education in Bexley and those used for national testing. The LEA is aware of this but has not as yet reached a decision about how best to resolve it.

80.   Support for secondary schools is satisfactory. In 2001, four secondary schools ran successful joint literacy and numeracy summer schools targeted at Year 6 pupils, and three more organised literacy schools. Work on the Key Stage 3 literacy is now gathering momentum and some schools are well prepared for this through their involvement in the 'Skillswork' project.   However, Bexley has not progressed as far with the strategy as some other LEAs. The LEA has successfully supported literacy work in secondary schools over a longer period, including an annual Shakespeare summer school and an LEA-wide public speaking competition.

Support for Numeracy

81.   Support for numeracy in primary schools is satisfactory with few areas of weakness. A good start has been made with the numeracy strategy in Key Stage 3.

82.   In the early stages of the numeracy strategy, standards of attainment at Key Stage 2 improved significantly. By summer 2000, 72 per cent of pupils attained Level 4, some four per cent ahead of the LEA's target for that year, and an increase of 13 per cent since 1998. At this point standards in Bexley were close to the national average. This year however, provisional results indicate little increase in the proportion of pupils attaining Level 4, although there has been a growth of the proportion gaining Level 5. Officers are confident that the 2002 target of 78 per cent is attainable, but this is not shared by a number of schools, which regard the targets set by the LEA as very demanding. However, nearly all primary schools consider that the LEA's support for developments in numeracy is at least satisfactory and two thirds of them rate it as good or very good.

83.   As for literacy, support for schools is differentiated according to need. Each school is placed in one of three groups, mainly based on performance in mathematics. Those in the intensive support group, currently 17 schools, receive six days of consultancy support each year. The rate of improvement made by schools receiving this support is not as consistent or as marked in numeracy as their equivalents in literacy. All schools have access to network meetings and periodic 'surgeries' which are successful and helpful.

84.   Good use is made of eleven leading teachers whose work is becoming more targeted on advice and demonstration lessons on specific aspects of numeracy, such as the use of calculators. The recently introduced mathematics homework scheme is already having a positive impact in some schools, though it has not yet got fully underway in others. 'Springboard 5' funding is enabling 42 primary schools to take part in this programme, which is already impacting on standards in Year 5.

85.   Support for secondary schools is satisfactory. Work to extend the numeracy strategy to Key Stage 3 has made a good beginning and is building effectively on the 'skillswork' SRB numeracy project.   Among other developments, this has included an assessment pack, training for learning support assistants and a range of out-of-school activities. The eight secondary schools taking part in phase one are

well supported by the Key Stage 3 consultant. Three teachers in each mathematics department have undergone three days training, and there has been additional training for special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) on work with pupils with special educational needs.

Support for information and communication technology

86.   Support for information and communications technology (ICT) is improving, but overall provision is unsatisfactory. Improving the use of ICT to support teaching and learning is an EDP priority. Until recently, support for the use of ICT in the curriculum has been unsatisfactory and there is a considerable backlog of schools needing help. As a result, those schools with a high level of in-house expertise have made sound progress, whilst those with less have made insufficient progress.

87.   Despite support for developing an infrastructure, most primary schools have still not achieved satisfactory linking of curriculum and administrative ICT. The transition to a predominantly PC provision has been slow and costly. The National Grid for Learning (NGfL) investment has enabled all schools to have a reasonable number of PCs, and overall pupil-computer ratios are close to the national average. As a result of sensible planning by the LEA, nearly all primary schools have an ICT suite of networked computers, with additional machines based in classrooms. A well chosen common software package supports the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) scheme of work. NGfL investment in secondary schools was allocated appropriately to complement existing stocks and configurations. All schools have internet connection, and through the London Grid for Learning, broadband access is planned for early in 2002.

88.   Until recently, support for ICT in the curriculum was insufficient and support for ICT development plans was variable. Now, all primary schools have had at least one advisory visit and a helpful training programme designed to help teachers with the new software package is in place.   However, there has been no LEA audit of the ICT competence and training needs of teachers.   Training under the New Opportunities Funding (NOF) has started slowly and at the end of the summer term about one in nine schools had not made a choice of a provider.

89.   There is only limited use of the internet for curriculum purposes. Some recent developments in using ICT to support literacy in primary schools is beginning to have positive outcomes, and schools taking part in a Key Stage 2 science project are making effective use of ICT.   These are promising beginnings, but much remains to be done to develop and implement a coherent support strategy through which ICT is used fully and effectively to support teaching and learning throughout the curriculum.

> **Recommendation**
>
> **Improve standards in ICT by:**
>
> - Extending its use throughout the curriculum by developing in discussion with schools a clear set of priorities for support that makes the most effective use of the available resources.

Support for schools causing concern.

90.   Support for schools causing concern is satisfactory with few areas of weakness. As the LEA has acquired more experience of supporting schools in serious weaknesses and special measures, the period of time taken to bring about sufficient improvement in primary schools has reduced. However, strategies for supporting the remaining secondary school, which was found to have serious weaknesses in 1997, received a formal warning from the LEA in January 2000, but was placed in special measures in September 2000, have not brought about enough improvement.

91.   Criteria used to determine whether a school is a cause of concern to the LEA are appropriate and clearly understood by officers, but are not included in the LEA's booklet that outlines how it supports these schools. Although this has been discussed at headteacher's meetings, schools vary in their understanding of the process and criteria used. They are much clearer about the support strategies that are likely to be employed. Some schools have referred themselves as a cause of concern.

> **Recommendation**
>
> **Improve support for schools causing concern by:**
>
> - Communicating more effectively the process and the criteria used to determine schools causing concern to assist schools in carrying out self-reviews which complement the LEA's monitoring processes**.**

92.   Following the identification of schools causing concern, either through external inspection or by the LEA's own monitoring process, a focus group comprising officers, advisers, the headteacher and governors is set up. A supported self-review is then usually undertaken by advisers working with the school, and the focus group decides an intervention strategy matched to need. Visits to schools that have experienced this are positive about the LEA's approach, which is usually effective in securing a shared view of what is to be done. This is a sound process which has led to effective intervention and improvement in primary schools, particularly in monitoring and evaluation procedures, and in planning for development.   In the case of one secondary school, the combined support of advisers and external consultants was effective in bringing the school out of special measures in an

acceptably short period of time. In the other secondary school previously referred to, the LEA has used a wide range of strategies including external consultants and a fixed term contract headship appointment, but these have been ineffective overall and the school remains in difficulties. A successful bid has been made to replace the school with a City Academy in 2002, strongly led by the director of education.

Support for school management

93. The LEA's support for leadership and management in its schools is satisfactory overall, with few weaknesses. A central feature of the strategy is its contribution to school autonomy. However, it is more effective in primary than in secondary schools. Recent inspections indicate that in three quarters of primary schools (higher than the national average) the quality of leadership and management is good, though this applied to only half the secondary schools inspected (considerably lower than the national average).

94. A sound strategy for leadership and management support has been developed with headteachers. In addition to regular meetings of senior officers with headteachers, the range of activities includes use of national training schemes, headteachers' conferences, a management development training programme in partnership with higher education institutions providing accredited courses for senior and middle managers, and an induction and mentorship programme for newly appointed and acting heads. Some use is made of local good practice through the use of leading literacy and numeracy teachers, but generally this is an under-developed aspect of support.

95. Central to this strategy is the promotion of school self-review. Response to the provision of school self-evaluation training provided by the LEA has been good. To support this, and at the request of headteachers, the LEA has produced a useful booklet to help school managers evaluate the quality of teaching and learning. Link advisers have worked with headteachers and subject leaders in several schools to introduce criteria-based lesson observations. They also work alongside senior and middle managers on supported self-reviews with a dual objective: to evaluate the school and to develop self-evaluation skills. The impact of this is variable across the LEA. Some schools have an established system for self-review that has been made more effective through the LEA's contribution, whilst other schools have still to make a start. The LEA has identified this as a weakness and has strengthened support through the EDP. Although the LEA recognises that school self-review will become an increasingly important feature in its monitoring of schools as a consequence of reducing the number of adviser visits, it does not yet make use of the outcome of reviews for this purpose.

> **Recommendation**
>
> **Improve support to school management by:**
>
> - Establishing with schools a procedure for systematic access to the outcomes of school reviews.

96.   The LEA has a sound recognition of the limitation imposed by its size on the range of professional development support that can be provided from its own resources.   To complement this, good partnership arrangements have been established with higher education institutions and other local training providers so that a good range of opportunities are made available to schools.   Support for newly qualified teachers is good.

97.   The recruitment and retention of teachers has recently become a problem of growing magnitude in Bexley; so far its impact has been minimised by imaginative approaches and hard work. At the time of the inspection there were 20 secondary and 2.5 primary vacancies, all of them covered either by supply staff or by redeployment within the schools.   However, a proportion of posts are filled by teachers whose qualifications and/or experience does not fit them well for the work they are doing, and the effects of this were evident in some of the schools visited. About 60 teachers from overseas are currently working in the LEA. Some are employed by agencies, others have been recruited both by direct contact overseas and through such means as video conferencing. The LEA has a Teacher Training Agency (TTA) supported recruitment manager who organises a range of activities such as recruitment fairs, promotes job-shares and maintains close contact with training institutions. Ten primary schools are taking part in the School Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) scheme, which is now in its third year. Retention of more experienced teachers is sometimes difficult because schools in neighbouring authorities can offer enhanced financial incentives. A steering group of headteachers and officers is examining ways of combating this, and various schemes to help with housing are in operation or being explored.

Support for governors

98.   The quality of support provided to governing bodies is outstanding and is a major strength of the authority. However, there is a weakness in liaison with link advisers. Central to the support is the excellent clerkship practice through which governors have ready access to knowledgeable and well-informed support and advice in addition to the more usual services such as the organisation and minuting of meetings. Those providing the service are employed by the education department and are rigorously trained. Without exception, schools indicated the significant value of their contribution. In addition to their support for governing bodies, clerks provide useful updating information to the LEA about schools, and monitor the use of the governor training programme, also a central feature of support. A carefully planned programme of courses and workshops is offered in locations selected for ease of

access and at times that maximise opportunities for attendance. Take-up of training opportunities is high, and evaluations are very positive. This dual support, together with termly briefing meetings for chairs and headtechers, are enabling governing bodies to understand and effectively engage in a strategic role in the management of schools.

99.   The LEA has recently taken steps to improve channels of consultation and communication directly with governors through the establishment of a forum, although visits to schools indicated that as yet this has had little impact. The forum addresses strategic issues, for example the revision of the EDP, and is open to any governor.

100.   In recent months successful efforts have been made to deal with what was formerly a large number of LEA governor vacancies. By removing the requirement that these should be filled only by those with party alignments, the proportion of vacant positions across the LEA has been reduced from 30 per cent to 8 per cent. This strategy has been supplemented by periodic recruitment campaigns

101.   When a school is identified as a cause of concern full information is provided to governors, who are involved in the focus group established to deal with the school's problems. If necessary, additional help is provided to enable governors to take a full part in the school's strategic development. However, it is not the practice of the LEA to send evaluation reports from visits to schools made by link advisers and other officers to chairs of governing bodies. This limits their ability to exercise their responsibilities for the school.

> **Recommendation**
>
> **Improve support for governors by:**
>
> - Sending copies of visit reports containing significant evaluation on the work schools by advisers and other officers to chairs of governing bodies as a matter of course.

Support for Early Years

102.   Support for early years education is satisfactory with a number of good features. Most schools with Key Stage 1 pupils have a nursery class, and evidence from OFSTED inspections suggests that overall attainment levels on entry are close to the national average, and that pupils make average progress in their early years.

103.   In addition, there are more than 50 early years settings in the private sector, and three neighbourhood nurseries are under consideration. The total provision for four year olds exceeds demand, and there is sufficient provision to meet demand for part-time places for three year olds. Supply is in excess of the places needed to meet government targets for 2002, and places are reasonably evenly distributed

throughout the borough. Provision for young children with additional and/or special educational needs is good, and this is well integrated with social services and health provision.

104. Good training and advice have helped both schools and private settings to develop a curriculum encompassing the early learning goals (ELGs). This has recently focused on assessment and recording, and the LEA is about to issue a well designed foundation stage record which will also be available to private providers.

105. The Early Years and Childcare Development Partnership (EYDCP) is fully operational and the LEA provides good support through its early years childcare and development unit. The partnership has been instrumental in the preparation of the Early Years and Childcare Plan, and makes effective use of the resources of public, private, and voluntary sector providers. The take-up of training has been good. All private settings have a designated special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO), for whom additional training has been provided, and the LEA is about to appoint qualified teachers to provide attachments for each setting. Some progress has also been made in developing out of school hours childcare for older children, with some private settings offering care before and after school, and through holiday play-schemes.

106. The children's information service was the first among London boroughs, and the tenth nationally to receive a Kite mark award for its quality. This provides a valuable source of support and advice to parents, particularly young mothers, and has purchased a bus to serve as a mobile centre. A Sure Start scheme is due to start in the near future in three wards in the north of the borough.

Support for post -16 education

107. Provision for 16-19 education in Bexley schools is in urgent need of rationalisation. The full-time education continuation rate beyond 16 (72 per cent in 2000) is lower than that found nationally, and one in three students in schools complete only one year of post 16 education. About 40 per cent of pupils remaining at school post-16 attend a Further Education college, and about 46 per cent are in school 6th forms in Bexley, Thirteen out of 16 secondary schools have 6th forms, including two special schools. The size of many of these, particularly in the non-selective schools, is very small with consequent restrictions on the curriculum that can be offered and on the cost effectiveness of staff deployment.

108. Good progress is being made towards achieving a viable solution for Catholic schools, with a diocesan proposal that one should become a 6th form college for Bexley and some adjacent areas, whilst others will become 11-16 comprehensive schools.

109.   The LEA has recently established a post-16 working group to encourage schools to search for an acceptable solution. Chaired by an elected member and with Learning Skills Council (LSC), schools, college and officer membership, it has embarked on studies of the participation rate, the range of the courses available beyond 16 and quality and standards of teaching and learning.   There are plans to explore the possibilities of using video conferencing facilities as a means of increasing the curriculum opportunities available. This is a useful contribution to ensuring that the issues surrounding 16-plus provision in the borough are examined and preparing the ground to some extent for the LSC which will acquire responsibility for post 16 provision from April 2002. In the meantime, however, there are serious deficiencies stemming from the proliferation of small 6th forms both for 16+ students and also for pupils in younger age groups, that could be reduced by improved co-operation between schools.

Recommendation

Improve support for post-16 education by:

- Identifying, in co-operation with schools, ways to improve post-16 educational opportunities;
- organising provision so that it is not subsidised by the diversion of resources from the 11-16 age group.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate planning

110.   Corporate planning for education is of good quality. The council has a good framework for a cross-cutting approach to planning, and plans are coherent, well produced and effectively cross-referenced. The Best Value action plan firmly aligns the council's six corporate objectives, the first of which is promoting education for life, to key plans for education, including the EDP. Education is strongly linked with other corporate objectives, and priorities and targets are clearly defined.

111.   High priority is given to education, which features strongly in the Bexley regeneration strategy, but this priority is not matched by the council's spending decisions overall. The Regeneration Strategy links education to the Single Regeneration Budget Delivery Plan, the Lifelong Learning Plan, the Early Years Development Plan (EYDP) and work with Travellers and other priority groups. The Quality Protects Management Action Plan (MAP) provides a good corporate structure for planning and delivering services through multi-agency partnerships between social services, education, health and the voluntary sector. Local objectives are well aligned to all relevant key plans

112.   Systems for co-ordinating, communicating and implementing corporate plans are effective at directorate level. The council's management board has a strong corporate planning function and a strong ethos of corporate working. The BVPP ensures clear lines of responsibility and accountability, and progress is systematically reviewed against performance indicators. Strategic planning, budgeting, and service delivery are well aligned, priorities for service development are appropriate, and service planning effective. Joint work with social services and Health is well developed at strategic level, through joint meetings and multi-agency working, particularly through integrated team approaches involving pupils with special educational needs (SEN). However, schools report operational concerns with health and social services.

113.   Procedures for evaluating corporate plans are well developed. The BVPP provides the policy framework for education, which in turn, drives individual staff objectives. A robust scheme of delegations appropriately locates the implementation of policies, plans and operational decisions with officers. Quarterly monitoring statements then effectively track progress against plans. In line with this, the council has developed a statement of 'core' values which link the delivery of services to the retention and development of staff. This 'working together' statement constitutes a robust framework for performance management and professional development. Regular reporting from officers enables members to monitor progress.

114.   This good planning for education is not sufficiently well communicated to schools. Headteachers and governors are unclear about the council's corporate aims

and corporate plans are not well known. In particular, headteachers are highly critical of budget decisions, and resentful that funding between education and other services does not appear to be based on a clear understanding of the needs of schools. The Council has an expressed commitment, and long term strategy for addressing this, but to an unspecified timescale. Until recently, a lack of openness over financial decision-making has left schools lacking trust in the fairness of financial decisions.

Recommendations

Improve corporate planning for education by:

- Working with schools to devise an overarching consultation and communication strategy which takes full account of existing mechanisms, incorporates the views of schools, and provides feedback to headteachers and governors on actions taken in response to their concerns;
- using this to promote an improved understanding in schools of the council's corporate aims, corporate plans and the priority afforded to education; and
- systematically evaluating its effectiveness by actively seeking the views of schools.

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115.   Leadership by elected members has been unsatisfactory. The former education committee did not provide a sufficiently clear educational lead. In the absence of enough direct contact with schools, members have relied too heavily on information and advice provided by the director of education. However, advice is clear, and well informed, regularly updates members on the progress of plans in line with performance indicators, and appropriately advises them of their responsibilities. Headteachers are highly critical of members' non-involvement and lack of contact with schools, and are strongly united in their view that most members have not been sufficiently committed to their leadership role.

116.   Until recently, elected members had not articulated a vision for education within the corporate plans of the council. A comprehensive statement has now been agreed. As it stands, this is insufficiently strongly linked to key plans and so does not establish firm links between vision and strategy, but will provide a secure foundation as plans are reviewed. Recent, and overdue moves have taken place to strengthen the role of members and to improve communications with schools and governors. Actions are appropriate and include budget briefings with headteachers, an improved interface with teacher unions, the setting up of a governor forum, a member-led Post-16 working group and communications to schools congratulating them on examination successes. The newly formed school standards and quality advisory group, which replaces the visiting panel, is yet to meet but promises to provide members with an improved range of information on the performance and progress of schools through its broadened remit. Headteachers are beginning to feel that more open routes of communication have been established, but that disengagement still remains.

117. Modernisation has enabled members to review their strategic role for education in the context of autonomous schools. The two cabinet portfolio holders are clear about their responsibilities, members have been well advised by officers, and a sound structure of accountability through scrutiny is now in place. This structure is yet to be fully tested but has the potential to enable members to assume a strong leadership role.

> **Recommendation**
>
> **Improve the overall educational leadership of members by:**
>
> - Working with a representative group of headteachers to determine ways in which contacts with schools can become more effective;
> - using the newly formed school standards and quality advisory group and other established forums to seek formally schools' views and concerns on current educational issues; and
> - establishing a feedback mechanism so schools are assured that their concerns have been considered and actioned by members.

118. Overall, strengths outweigh weaknesses in the quality of leadership given by senior officers. The Chief Executive provides very capable leadership. Whilst the Children and Student Services and School Effectiveness Departments are ably led, the two newly appointed assistant directors have not yet been able to assume full leadership responsibilities. The leadership of senior officers in education is efficient in that good plans, structures and frameworks are in place, and all senior officers are committed to raising standards. The LEA's drive for school autonomy is appropriate and the LEA is acting in line with government directives. However, schools characterise the LEA's overall approach to school improvement as compliant to its statutory obligations and lacking in initiative and inspiration.

119. There is considerable tension between school autonomy and the LEA's strategies for communication and consultation. In practice, communication is efficiently managed through good quality presentations and documentation, but schools are strong in their view that there is insufficient opportunity for in-depth consultation, documentation is often too onerous, and timescales for consultation frequently too short. A disturbingly large proportion of schools report concerns over inadequate explanations for decisions that have been taken, for example, aspects of budget delegation.

120. This, together with a lack of confidence in members to take serious account of the views of headteachers, and the view shared by a large number of headteachers that the director of education is too distanced from their work, has resulted in an unsatisfactory LEA-school partnership.

Partnership

121.   A commitment to strong, strategic partnerships and collaborative action underpins the council's approach to regeneration and sustainable improvement, and working in partnership to promote education for life is one of the council's six corporate objectives. The education department has developed successful links with a range of partners which have been further strengthened through the recently restructured directorate.

122.   Well targeted work is taking place in schools to promote parent-school partnerships for example, Family Learning projects in specific wards, which involve primary pupils and their parents in curriculum holiday projects. Good use is made of Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funding; 'skillswork' projects in secondary schools, a partnership across five boroughs, have supported a wide range of successful initiatives in literacy, numeracy, ICT, employability skills and combating social exclusion. Bexley is also an associate partner in a cross-borough city learning centre. The Bexley Community Safety Partnership has strong and successful links with the council, police, probation service and health authority, and local initiatives have resulted in a reduction in youth crime and disorder, and in non-attendance at school. A range of preventative school-based work also takes place through the youth service.

123.   The Bexley Education Business Partnership is successful in developing effective links between local businesses, the community and education. There is close working with health agencies, steered by a multi-agency partnership group which includes voluntary organisations and parents. Relationships with the dioceses are good. The Early Years Partnership is successful, as are partnerships with higher education institutions and local training providers.

Management services

124.   Overall, management services are satisfactory but there are weaknesses in quality assurance, and support for information management and ICT.

125.   Support for schools in the **procurement of services** is broadly satisfactory. There are however some weak areas. A comprehensive range of services is traded with schools. With the exceptions of payroll, aspects of ICT, cleaning and transport, most services are provided by the council. The buyback of key services such as payroll, personnel and the School Information and Management Systems (SIMS) service is high. Schools are provided with service statements which enable them to purchase according to their needs; service agreements are clear and costings are transparent. There is effective monitoring of the central procurement arrangements for educational supplies and maintenance contracts.   Quality assurance through Best Value reviews is good. However, overall quality assurance mechanisms are not adequately in place to ensure that schools receive good services, whether they are

provided by the council or not, as quality assurance and performance management are not well linked.

> **Recommendation**
>
> **Improve management services by:**
>
> - Introducing quality assurance mechanisms which cover all services and which enable senior managers to be in touch with the quality of service received by schools.

126.   Support for administrative ICT is unsatisfactory although good plans are in place for improvement. **Administrative ICT** was frequently criticised in visits to schools. There are weaknesses in support for hardware, for financial management software and in the quality of training. Schools encounter difficulties with systems support especially when the solution to a problem may fall within the contractual responsibilities of more than one provider. Numerous administrative systems do not yet have working connections to the internet and a significant number of schools feel inadequately supported. Schools are concerned by the loss of key members of the SIMS support team. However, the LEA has set out an appropriate and thoughtful ICT strategy which, if delivered effectively, would place the LEA in a strong position by April 2002. This includes broadband connections for all schools, the linkage of curriculum and administrative networks, electronic data transfer via a secure intranet, the introduction of central and LEA management information systems linked to schools and the inclusion of schools in the council intranet. Progress is evident in most of these areas and good progress has been made with the use of ICT for electronically-stored central data. Planning addresses the scope for ICT to reduce administrative burdens.

> **Recommendation**
>
> **Improve management services by:**
>
> - Improving support for administrative ICT, focusing particularly on hardware and systems support, and ensuring that the planned developments are effectively resourced and implemented.

127.   Support for **financial management** is satisfactory. However, more consistent arrangements need to be put in place to support schools where there are actual or potential budget deficits, and schools need to be clearer about the support available for planning and controlling their budgets. The bursarial service is well equipped to fulfil these needs. It provides a good service to 29 per cent of the schools and it has a good focus on quality assurance. Until recently, there was no single point of contact for each school to enable the LEA to maintain a knowledge of individual schools. The financial systems used by the LEA are appropriate and deliver the required level of accuracy of financial information. There have, however, been

difficulties with the implementation of the most recent financial computer software package. Payroll, which is provided by an external contractor gives a satisfactory service. Internal audit provides schools with thorough health checks.

Recommendation

Improve management services by:

- Ensuring the recently appointed education officer for planning and financial support develops effective links between schools and senior officers who can not only support financial management, but also help improve communication between schools and the LEA on financial matters.

128.   Support for **personnel** is satisfactory overall and there are significant strengths. The service provides good support for capability issues and it has made a positive impact on school improvement. The service is presently increasing support to schools in managing the relatively high level of sickness absence. Good use is made of ICT through the SIMS personnel module and a website is available for schools to access personnel advice, model policies and practical tools to aid personnel management. Links with payroll are sound but some payroll errors are attributed to the interface between the two services. Quality assurance systems have been put in place to overcome this.

129.   Support for **property management** is satisfactory with significant strengths. Property management services are effective within the resources available, much of which is delegated to schools. Schools are clear about their responsibilities and there are examples of good support from property services. Buildings officers provide thoughtful and professional advice to schools on the use of devolved funding and in the management of building projects. Their work is effectively linked to asset management planning. Support for **grounds maintenance** is satisfactory. Support for **cleaning** is satisfactory. The contract is to be re-tendered to a more appropriate specification from a Best Value review following the identification of weaknesses in service provision. The **school meals service** is satisfactory and has also been subject to a Best Value review.

SECTION 4 : SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION

The LEA strategy for special educational needs

130.   The LEA's strategy for Special Educational Needs (SEN) is satisfactory, with strengths outweighing weaknesses. The SEN policy, approved by Committee in September 2000, clearly states an intention to secure pupil entitlement in line with their educational needs, and appropriately identifies the roles and responsibilities of the LEA, schools and parents.   It also reflects the Government's intentions in its commitment to increasing inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream settings, further developing early intervention, and strategies to help parents and carers. A further positive step, signalling the LEA's intent, has been the decision to merge the SEN and Behaviour Forums into a single Inclusion Forum.

131.   The SEN action plan, the EDP and the school organisation plan identify key targets for policy and service development and are used to monitor progress. However, the commitment to inclusion is expressed in too general terms and although the SEN Action Plan has specific activities and targets for development, implementation is still at an early stage.   There is, too, expressed commitment to the development of special schools as centres of excellence and some examples of effective outreach to mainstream, but as yet these are not systematic and rely on initiatives from schools. The plans also express clear intent to work regionally with other LEAs in developing joint provision for low incidence special educational needs, but within a broad timescale.

132.   There has been general and detailed consultation on the future of SEN and both the school survey and visits to schools confirmed that there is full knowledge of the LEA's intention to develop inclusive practice further.   Acceptance of and support for the strategy and its implications are significantly stronger in primary schools than in secondary schools. Over the last five years the LEA has reduced its reliance on independent and non-maintained school places by 50 per cent, but sees little current prospect of further reduction. About 55 per cent of statemented pupils are in mainstream schools (below the national average of 61 per cent); this includes resource provision in nine primary and two secondary schools.   Both the EDP and SEN Action Plan have targets to increase the numbers of pupils in mainstream, with training and financial plans to assist their implementation, but as yet these are insufficiently detailed. In practice, progress is satisfactory but increasing inclusion will involve a re-examination of provision in the secondary sector.

Recommendation

Improve special education provision by:

- Examining the possibilities for increased resource provision in the secondary sector in seeking to increase momentum towards wider inclusion.

Statutory obligations

133.   The LEA's arrangements for meeting its statutory obligations are good. There are clear and rigorous criteria for statutory assessment and arrangements are effective.   Officers have worked hard to improve timescales for the completion of statements, with thorough systems for following up delays.   As a result, there has been significant improvement and figures currently show that 98 per cent excluding exceptions are completed within the 18 weeks, and 74 per cent including exceptions.   Alongside this, support and information for parents are impressive. The LEA has provided and disseminated increasingly effective documentation and guidance for parents and pupils.   Registered appeals by parents to the Special Educational Needs Tribunal have been high but have reduced by almost a third over the last two years, from 29 in 1998/99 to 19 in 1999/00, as a result of good developmental work with parents through the Parent Partnership. Latest figures indicate no more than two appeals this year.

134.   The quality of statements and individual education plans (IEPs) seen during the inspection was overall good; more recent statements are much improved on earlier ones, providing the detail, specificity and quantification necessary for the formulation of effective IEPs. A review of a sample of casefiles showed them to be effectively organised and maintained.   Casework, often difficult, is handled sensitively and the only weakness, which is being addressed, is the complexity of language sometimes used in formal letters to parents.   The support of the Parent Partnership service is well regarded by parents and the LEA's work with them, especially in the early years, helps them to challenge and question as well as to gain skills in helping to manage their children's behaviour and learning.

135.   Arrangements for annual reviews of statements fully meet requirements. Although responsibility for making individual arrangements rests with the schools, the LEA is appropriately represented at key points of transition or in cases of potential difficulty, to provide advice and guidance to parents. Officers routinely scrutinise reports of annual reviews and always respond to suggested amendments. In addition, through the introduction of a new format, they administer them consistently to secure clear, helpful detail to assist planning for and attainment of, learning objectives. Officers also generally secure coverage of reviews of pupils placed outside the LEA.

Improvement and Value for Money

136.   Overall, support for school improvement is satisfactory.   Guidance to schools on the identification and assessment of pupils with special educational needs is sound; so too is the training of governors in schools' responsibilities for meeting them.   The training and support for special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) are satisfactory, and supplemented by access to support and information from a research institute. There are effective arrangements for representation from

SENCOs on statutory assessment and placement panels. Consultative arrangements for SENCOs are sound but lack secure cross phase linkages. Training provision for SENCOs is satisfactory in primary schools, but unsatisfactory in most secondary schools.

137. In general, clear SEN criteria provide the basis for consistent decisions on assessments and statements, and there is a general and justifiable view that decisions are fair and consistent. The LEA has full regard to the Code of Practice for SEN and has made appropriate preparations to help schools, parents and others prepare for the local implications of the changes to it, now expected in January 2002. The progress of pupils on Stages 1 to 4 of the Code is tracked by schools themselves through IEPs, whilst that of statemented pupils is reviewed by the LEA at annual review. Every school also holds a very effective termly SEN team meeting at which the SENCO, linked educational psychologist and assessment teacher review pupil progress and plan developments. Visits to schools during the inspection confirmed the value of this arrangement and, in those schools which had received support, the value of the speech and language support assistant (SALSA) team, not only in supporting individual pupils but also in providing opportunities for schools' staff to develop their own expertise through working with the SALSA team. On the other hand, there is no obvious connection between behaviour support and the work of the emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) special schools. This reduces the impact of SEN services generally, and LEA is currently addressing it.

138. There is an effective team of educational psychologists allocated to schools according to need. Their expertise and quality are rightly valued by schools but a number regard provision as insufficient. Spending on educational psychologists is below average when compared with all other LEAs. A range of teaching support services are soundly deployed and managed to avoid overlap or duplication. Access to services is differentiated in line with need and in accordance with clear criteria understood by virtually all schools. Advisory teacher support for pupils with sensory impairment and for autistic spectrum disorders is rightly well regarded by schools. Specialist advisory support is highly regarded and effective.

139. Funding for pupils with SEN is broadly average and monitoring of budgets held by the LEA is robust. Despite a projected overspend from the costs of home to school transport and on the education of pupils in independent schools, procedures for controlling expenditure are sound. All services, except aspects of learning support, are centrally administered with associated service reviews, satisfaction surveys and annual reviews. Support provision for pupils is available at earlier stages of the Code of Practice through SALSA, but the existing arrangement by which additional support is substantially associated with statements provides a perverse incentive for schools to see statements as the main means of securing additional resources. Provision for pupils is satisfactory and so is their progress. Costs are average and strengths outweigh weaknesses. Value for money is, on balance, satisfactory and Best Value principles inform the work of the service.

Recommendation

Improve special education provision by:

- Consulting across the LEA on a strategy and plan for inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream, clearly indicating the part to be played by special, primary and secondary schools as well as provision outside the LEA; and
- developing more precise mechanisms and indicators for evaluating improvement against investment and simultaneously consulting about the most effective ways of changing the balance of funding, from statemented special educational needs towards non-statemented special educational needs in promoting increased delegation of resources to schools.

SECTION 5: ACCESS

The supply of school places

140.   The LEA's planning of school places is satisfactory overall and has good features. There are six per cent surplus places in the primary sector and 11 per cent in the secondary sector. Six primary schools and four secondary schools have 20 per cent or more surplus places. The overall level of surplus places in secondary schools results largely from planned expansion to meet forecasted need. Thirteen secondary schools have had their capacity extended as the council has balanced increased places with the need to provide sufficient capacity for parental choice within a diverse and selective secondary school system. Forecasts show a fall in primary school numbers particularly in two areas and a review of primary places is presently underway aimed at reducing pockets of surplus places. Forecasting in the primary sector is very accurate. In the secondary sector forecasting is complex because of the movement of pupils between boroughs, particularly Greenwich and Bromley. About 20 per cent of pupils in Bexley secondary schools are resident outside of Bexley. Forecasting errors of 1.75 per cent are understandably high at secondary level, but Bexley is working with other LEAs for improved accuracy.

141.   The school organisation plan was produced on time and after full consultation. It has subsequently been revised to cover the period from 2001 to 2005. The plan provides a clear and concise summary of the projected need for primary and secondary school places and sets out proposals for some reorganisation within the secondary sector. The reduction in infant class sizes has been well managed, and targets achieved. A City Academy is to be opened, and the council is working with an arch-diocesan authority on a proposal to reorganise 16 to 19 year-old provision across three Roman Catholic secondary schools in the Bexley area, but falls short of considering the reorganisation of small sixth forms in community and foundation schools. There is good liaison with diocesan boards. The plan addresses inclusion and the provision of special education, including special classes and resource bases within mainstream schools. However, it does not identify the provision of places in the secondary sector for pupils with special educational needs who are presently catered for in mainstream settings in primary schools.

Asset management planning

142.   Asset management is satisfactory overall and it has a number of strengths. Improving the quality of buildings is an integral part of the school improvement agenda. Considerable improvements have been made to school buildings yet there is much more that needs to be done.

143.   The LEA has a backlog of building improvements and a plan for achieving them. A Private Finance Initiative (PFI) is a key part of the LEA strategy for long-term investment in secondary provision. Further bids are planned in the primary sector. The development of the City Academy will involve major improvements to

the quality of accommodation. In school visits, inspectors saw good improvements to school buildings and good quality new buildings. Many of the schools were part of a programme to replace windows and doors. New specialist facilities, particularly for ICT were evident. In contrast, some school buildings had significant inadequacies. For example, a secondary school had been expanded to the point where increased pupil numbers led to a worrying level of congestion in corridors and inadequate dining facilities. When the backlog in dealing with capital maintenance is included, there are a number of schools that require considerable investment, including some in areas of high social need. Temporary classrooms are infrequently used, but some are of poor quality.

144.   The asset management plan is satisfactory. Good consultation with the advisory service has ensured proper regard for school improvement. The DfES has approved the plan and the top 25 priorities for funding. The first annual audit of the asset management plan gave Bexley a satisfactory grade. Effective arrangements are in place for consultation with schools and headteachers' views are represented on a Fair Funding asset management group. Schools were actively involved in condition and suitability surveys and the findings were discussed and agreed. Good use is made of ICT for recording property information, and good advice is provided to schools on how capital schemes are managed by the LEA and how schools can best manage improvements in accommodation. There are effective links to other major plans including the EYDCP, school organisation, behaviour support, special education plans and the EDP.

Admissions

145.   The LEA manages admissions to nurseries and to primary and secondary community schools very effectively. It works closely with voluntary aided and foundation schools and has developed good co-operative working arrangements. Admissions information provided for parents is of good quality and accompanied by helpful questions and answers about school transfer and admission appeals. Information is provided in community languages. Indicators concerning geographical proximity and levels of first choice are provided to help parents judge the likelihood of success with applications. There are local performance indicators for admissions; the management of admissions has the confidence of schools, and arrangements comply with the Code of Practice.

146.   A high proportion of applicants are offered their preferred nursery classes. Primary school admissions are satisfactory. There is pressure on secondary school places as a result both of increased pupil numbers and the demand for places from parents living outside Bexley. The LEA has a complex admission situation to manage at secondary level due to selection, considerable cross-border movement of pupils and a diverse range of schools. As a result of difficulties experienced in 2000 when admissions exceeded agreed admission numbers in several schools, a successful consultation took place to modify the admission arrangements. Bexley works co-operatively with neighbouring LEAs and diocesan boards and the

admissions forum has been appropriately used to undertake consultation on arrangements.

147.   The allocation of secondary school places is completed by March and appeals are largely completed in time for school induction in the summer term. There is a relatively high proportion of appeals in both primary and secondary sectors and a high proportion are decided in favour of parents. Schools are positive over the LEA's handling of admissions appeals.

148.   The LEA has devised procedures for dealing with casual admissions which identifies the respective responsibilities of the LEA and the sending and receiving schools. This is effective in the primary sector, and all but one secondary school have accepted the protocols. It is a promising approach which can only work to its full effect with the agreement of all headteachers, and most importantly, with secondary headteachers.

Provision of education otherwise than at school

149.   Provision for pupils with no school place is good. For permanently excluded pupils and for those at risk of exclusion, there are two pupil referral units (PRUs) and in-school learning support units (LSUs) in four secondary schools; these arrangements work well.

150.   Entry to provision is meticulously overseen by two children out of school panels (COOSPs), whose functions include regular monitoring of progress of pupils in alternative provision and oversight of re-entry into mainstream schools. From the start of the current academic year the LEA has met the Government's 2002 target for full time provision for permanently excluded pupils. At Key Stages 1 to 3 provision is full time at the relevant PRU with good coverage of the National Curriculum; attendance levels are above 90 per cent on average. At Key Stage 4, with the exception of two pupils, full time provision takes the form of packages which include part time attendance at the PRU and part time attendance in other provision provided either by the college of further education or from the voluntary sector. Performance of these students at GCSE and equivalent is commendable. There is effective monitoring of entry to provision and progress whilst in it, and this includes monitoring by gender and ethnicity. There is also a fast track procedure for ensuring that permanently excluded children in public care have rapid access to full time education. The primary PRU has 18 full time equivalent places and the secondary 36. It is a sign of the flexibility and robustness of the arrangement that both PRUs were able to handle last year's return to high permanent exclusion rates whilst at the same time succeeding in attaining full time provision.

151.   A further function of both COOSPs is to promote the early return of pupils in alternative provision to mainstream education. Arrangements at Key Stages 1 to 3 are effective; last academic year, no pupil was out of mainstream provision longer

than three terms and the mean figure was just over one term. At Key Stage 4, return to mainstream was almost non-existent.

152.   There are sound arrangements for responding to the educational needs of a small number (three last year) of schoolgirl pregnancies and schoolgirl mothers. The arrangements for pupils requiring alternative tuition on account of illness are also sound. The LEA provides helpful guidance for parents who wish to educate their children at home (80 last year) and ensures that arrangements are appropriately monitored by the education welfare and advisory services. There is sound partnership with the health service in promoting the development of Bexley Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (BCAMHS), and in addition the LEA itself makes provision for seriously affected pupils, including a high proportion of school phobic and other vulnerable children, through its own small total support for learning service. In the course of a year this service supports upwards of 40 children and their parents, providing in-school and out-of-school packages with the overriding aim of returning children to mainstream provision.

Attendance

153.   Support for attendance is sound with few significant weaknesses. Attendance in primary schools in 1999/2000 was broadly in line with the national figure (94.1 per cent compared with 94.3 per cent), and unauthorised absence was 0.3 per cent (compared with 0.5 per cent nationally). Attendance in secondary schools was below the national average (90.6 per cent compared with 91.4 per cent) and the unauthorised absence figure (1.1 per cent compared with 1.0 per cent) was broadly in line with the national figure. The LEA figures for 2000/2001 are in all cases, except secondary unauthorised absence (which is slightly better than in the previous year), slightly worse than the figures for the previous year.

154.   In schools visited during the inspection, support was rated satisfactory or better in all schools except one. Overall the work of individual education welfare officers (EWOs) was rightly rated highly and the few criticisms focused upon sufficiency of provision and, in one case, problems of liaison with other LEAs in relation to extra-district pupils.

155.   The deployment of the education welfare service (EWS) is based on a clear audit of need and allocations of support to schools are transparent and appropriately differentiated. Each school has a named EWO, and data are subject to increasingly sophisticated analysis to focus more clearly on individual and school specific problems. There were 25 prosecutions for non- attendance in 1999/2000 and 15 last year. The figure for last year would have been higher but procedures used by one secondary school were deficient and proceedings had to be discontinued. In general the LEA uses prosecutions appropriately, resulting in some parents securing improved attendance of their children.

156.   Liaison with the police is good. There is also increasingly effective collaboration with the police and communities through truancy watch on estates across the LEA. In the north of the LEA there is a particularly important project, Wax in Action, developing pupil mentoring for at-risk youngsters in transition between Years 6 and 7.

157.   Targets for improving attendance have been set and adequate steps are taken to meet all statutory responsibilities. The costs of the EWS are lower than average and although the service has not been formally subject to Best Value procedures, the underlying principles inform its activities.

Support for behaviour

158.   Support for behaviour is unsatisfactory in spite of good systems and procedures. The original behaviour support plan (BSP) was a sound document providing a rational and reasonable framework, yet there is little sense of a common acceptance across all secondary schools that behaviour and exclusions are not just a problem for the LEA, but can only be resolved by common understanding and joint action. From visits to schools, there was evidence of some schools persisting in trying to support pupils with difficulties beyond all reasonable expectation, but also evidence in others of patterns of exclusion indicating low levels of tolerance of such difficulties. Some schools were potentially acting unlawfully in arranging for informal agreements with parents to seek other schools for their children. The LEA is quite right in robustly challenging such arrangements.

159.   Levels of permanent and fixed term exclusions have been traditionally high, and remain too high. At the primary stage it has been well over twice the national average in all years except 1999/2000 when it was below; last year the figure increased to 16 (over twice the national average).   At the secondary stage, permanent exclusions, apart from 1999/2000 when the figure was 23 (below national average), have varied between 55 and last year 60 (over twice the national average).   This means that the LEA, having exceeded its indicative 2002 target the year before last, now has to retrieve from its original starting position. The number of fixed term exclusions shows no deviation from a determined upward trend from 652 overall four years ago to 1425 last year.

160.   Building on its predecessor, the LEA's most recent BSP is a sensible and comprehensive document. It identifies the successes and failures of the original, clearly addresses the strengths and weaknesses of the target setting and attainment processes and sets new targets with detailed and specific activities for reaching them within well constructed time frames. The plan meets national requirements, and provides an effective local picture and perspective. It is based on a clear analysis of need and is appropriately linked to the EDP. There is an appended effective booklet on bullying and a large behaviour management training handbook.

161.   In practice, there are 'revolving door' and respite arrangements provided for Key Stage 3 pupils at the secondary PRU and for Key Stage 1 and 2 pupils at the

primary PRU. In both cases they provide a valuable opportunity to attempt alternative strategies for pupils encountering difficulties in mainstream schools. Especially significant is the development by the primary PRU of a focus group approach to particular groups of children at risk, who receive part-time provision at the PRU for a term followed by phased and supported re-entry into their mainstream class. This is still in its early stages, but it is helping to pre-empt exclusions and to develop the competence of mainstream teachers. Behaviour support is well regarded for its expertise and criticised only where there is perceived insufficiency.

162. In non-selective secondary schools where there are surplus places, numbers of permanent exclusions are swollen as a result of non-routine admissions (sometimes from other LEAs), and placements subsequently breaking down. The casual admission protocol was developed at the request of these schools and the concept of the receiving school being able to call a 'planning meeting' is showing some signs of promoting serious discussion involving LEA and schools and thereby promoting the possibility of improvement.

163. Despite a sound framework, sensible practice, challenging targets and co-ordinated support through the behaviour support service, as well as social inclusion funds through the Standards Fund, Pupil Retention Grant and the development of learning support units in four secondary schools, impact in reducing exclusions is unsatisfactory .

Recommendation

Improve support for pupil behaviour by:

- Convening meetings of officers, members, headteachers and chairs of governing bodies to consider current practice and to develop co-operative strategies for tackling and reducing exclusions; and
- putting in place monitoring, support and evaluation arrangements to secure progress

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Health, safety, welfare, child protection

164. Support for health and safety, welfare and child protection is satisfactory with few significant weaknesses. However, schools are highly critical of the effectiveness of liaison with social services, particularly expressing dissatisfaction on delayed responses to pupil referrals in all but serious referral cases, as well as the need for further training in child protection.

165. The LEA meets its statutory obligations for health and safety, providing a wide range of documentation through a highly specific and rigorous model framework based on Health and Safety executive documentation. Earlier this year, a good health and safety monitoring checklist was issued to schools and a programme of audit has started. The LEA has also issued a compendious risk assessment manual and other guidance on how to access risk assessment procedures.

166.   The LEA provides schools with clear information and guidance for safe-guarding the health and welfare of pupils. It takes appropriate steps to meet its statutory responsibilities and relationships between education, social services and health at the strategic level are clearly close and productive, despite indications from schools that these are not always replicated at the operational level. The LEA has contributed to the health improvement strategy and there is an effective healthy schools initiative running in schools across Bexley.

167.   Guidance on child protection is satisfactory and the LEA takes appropriate steps to meet its statutory responsibilities, including an effective process for handling child and teacher issues separately in the early stages of individual cases. All schools have designated teachers and training on the Assessment Framework has helped to improve understanding of procedures. There is a child protection module in newly qualified teachers' (NQTs) induction and some specific training for headteachers and named teachers, but overall the focus on training has become somewhat blurred. Training has now been wisely secured to address the implications of new procedures and practices in schools. The services have not been subject to Best Value reviews but the underlying principles are understood and used.

> **Recommendation**
>
> **Improve support for child protection by:**
>
> - Ensuring that a further programme of training on child protection for headteachers, designated teachers and governors is carried out.

Support for children in public care

168.   LEA support for children in public care (CiPC) is satisfactory with few significant weaknesses. An education liaison officer plays a key role in an inter-agency central support team. Education, health and social services contribute to funding and the service is located within the Social Services Department. The liaison officer has been in post for a year and, with her colleagues, is building the service on firm foundations. She is meeting increasing responsiveness from schools, all of whom have designated teachers. The location of the service within Social Services is embedding it into mainstream activity there, as well as in education.

169.   Effective joint training has been provided for designated teachers, carers and social workers and a further programme of training is planned and announced. All children in public care have named social workers and the monitoring officers within the team cover Bexley pupils at schools inside and outside the LEA. Monitoring systems are now in place and provide a full range of performance data at all key stages, as well as information on attendance, exclusions, and ethnic groups. The most significant weakness is the absence of longer-term data (apart from the last two years), but this will be resolved as new procedures are put in place. A further

weakness has been the comparatively slow development of a fully shared database but this is now within sight of completion.

170.   A key element of development is the increasingly active role of elected members. Members receive regular and effective information which enables them to assume strategic responsibility as corporate parents. There is also a growing practice of seeking the views of children and young people about the services they receive.   Overall, the service is securely based and poised to develop further good practice from a sound framework.   The service operates with due regard to best value principles.

Minority ethnic pupils including Travellers

171.   Support for ethnic minority pupils including Traveller pupils is satisfactory with strengths outweighing weaknesses.

172.   Arrangements for pupils who have English as an additional language (EAL) is rated as satisfactory or better in three quarters of schools. In schools where it was rated unsatisfactory, criticisms related to insufficiency, as well as to some inconsistent quality of teaching, and inflexibility of support. In general however support satisfactorily meets requirements. There has been insufficient attention to developing the capacity of all schools to meet the needs of both ethnic minority and EAL pupils, but support is improving. The Ethnic Minority and Travellers Achievement Grant (EMTAG) plan covers 57 languages and is appropriately cross-referenced to the EDP. There are separate strategies for Traveller children, ethnic minority groups generally at risk of under achievement, and for pupils with EAL. Arrangements for handling the needs of asylum seeker and refugee children and their families are sound and there is a good admissions protocol allowing for the involvement of interpreters.

173.   The Traveller education service, set up two years ago, has made a secure and solid start in establishing its support for schools, fostering positive and trusting relationships with Traveller families and securing links within the education department and with other agencies. The main thrusts of the work to date have been targeted support for Traveller pupils in school, and work with schools on curricular and behavioural initiatives. As a result, there have been some useful collaborations, especially in the secondary phase with, for example the youth offending team and EWOs. The service has identified an appropriate range of need linked to improving access, attendance and the achievement of Traveller pupils and has made a useful start on tracking pupil progress through ensuring that pupils are fully part of their school's target setting and monitoring systems.

174.   Overall, services for minority ethnic pupils including Traveller pupils are soundly managed, secure satisfactory value for money and work with due regard to Best Value principles.

> **Recommendation**
>
> **Improve provision minority ethnic pupils including Traveller pupils by:**
>
> - Reviewing the operation of the services to ensure that support is securely focused on developing the capacity of individual schools to make their own provision for pupils, and secure appropriate training for them to do so.

Support for gifted and talented pupils

175. Support for gifted and talented pupils is satisfactory and strengths outweigh weaknesses. However, at Key Stage 3 in 2000, Level 6 performance in mathematics and science was only in line with national figures; at GCSE, higher grade results indicate a greater proportion of schools performing less well than comparable schools on a national basis. Not all schools set targets for higher attaining pupils. There is a tradition of extension activities in the LEA which includes summer schools, master classes, training for teachers, work with schools on 'A' levels and an annual Shakespeare summer school. In addition, the ICT Centre for Excellence is well used to support a group of able pupils. The LEA acknowledges that these well established activities have in practice been limited to a minority of schools and has recognised in light of the DfES initiative, that there needs to be more systematic and much wider inclusion.

176. A plan, agreed by Committee in March 2001, discharges this intent. Its policy is sensible and well focused indicating an appropriate level of support, encouragement and challenge, with guidance to schools reflecting DfES requirements and guidelines. The arrangements for monitoring and evaluation are well focused on developing schools' own capacity to evaluate progress for themselves. The policy and plan have been distributed to schools as a basis for consultation which will end at the end of December; a directory of contacts has also been issued. Already, as a result of consultation, the LEA is broadening its approach to developing excellence across the spectrum of school activity. Visits to schools indicate a general knowledge of the LEA's intentions, and agreement that the way forward should be through the systematic use and adaptation of existing initiatives to involve of all schools. An increasing number of schools now have designated teachers. The strategy is clear and sensible and fully reflects national approaches adapted to meet the needs of the LEA.

Combating Racism

177. LEA policy and practice on combating racism are satisfactory and are improving. Although initial development was deliberate rather than rapid, this was intentional in order to engage widespread support. The LEA's response to the

Macpherson Report was itself prompt: in June 1999 it adopted an Equality Assurance Policy which was circulated to, and adopted by, schools.

178. The LEA has a twofold strategy for development: full compliance with the requirements and implications of legislation, and activities through community education which celebrate ethnic minority achievement and promote diversity. In March 2001, the LEA agreed a revised policy and plan with specific objectives for services covering aspects of equality, including racism, in service delivery and employment. As part of the implementation, all senior staff in Education have received training on the Act; its implications for schools will be covered in training programmes for teachers. The local authority has adopted the Council for Racial Equality standard for local government at Level 2 for the current year with a targeted Level 3 for next year. Governing bodies have been provided with a model policy and plan to consider in the light of schools' needs and this sets out a framework for achieving the CRE standards for schools.

179. In promoting diversity, the LEA provides grants to supplementary schools and voluntary organisations, is developing community forums, and uses the curriculum to tackle racial issues through arts development work in schools, the combating harassment and racial tension project in the north of the borough, and other activities promoting cultural awareness, as well as family literacy, numeracy and ICT activities. Visits to schools indicate that whilst the reporting and compliance requirements are understood, the celebration of cultural and racial diversity is still at an early stage, but overall, strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area of activity.

Promoting social inclusion

180. Measures to combat social exclusion are satisfactory. Despite the lack of an overarching policy and some initial reluctance to use the term 'social inclusion', there are significant examples of sound inclusive practice and policy across the LEA.

181. A strength is the effective and successful strategy to provide full time provision for pupils with no school place. Work with ethnic minority pupils, Traveller children, and those with English as an additional language, is satisfactory. Similarly the LEA's approach to combating racism, its work with children in public care and with gifted and talented pupils is also satisfactory, although full impact on schools has still to be felt. In special educational provision, schools are in no doubt about the LEA's intention to move towards greater inclusiveness, and practice is clearly moving in that direction with just over fifty per cent of pupils with statements of special educational needs now in mainstream settings. However, specific details of developments for example, funding special schools for outreach work, could be clearer. Partnerships with other agencies are generally effective at the strategic level with joint working on major plans and initiatives. Single Regeneration Funding (SRB) funding is effectively targeted to promote social inclusion , especially in the north of the borough. The LEA has made a sound start but more rapid progress is needed and is inhibited by the absence of a local over-arching policy framework to add coherence and impact to these approaches.

Recommendation

Improve the LEA's capacity to tackle social exclusion by:

- Developing, in consultation with the LEA's partners, a policy and action plan to secure co-ordinated action and enhance inclusion.

APPENDIX 1: RECOMMENDATIONS

This report makes a number of recommendations. However, the following are fundamental in that they affect the LEA's overall capacity for improvement:

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Improve corporate planning for education by:
- working with schools to devise an overarching consultation and communication strategy which takes full account of existing mechanisms, incorporates the views of schools, and provides feedback to headteachers and governors on actions taken in response to their concerns;
- using this to promote an improved understanding in schools of the council's corporate aims, corporate plans and the priority afforded to education; and
- systematically evaluating its effectiveness by actively seeking the views of schools.

Improve the overall educational leadership of members by:
- working with a representative group of headteachers to determine ways in which contacts with schools can become more effective;
- using the newly formed school standards and quality advisory group and other established forums to seek formally schools' views and concerns on current educational issues; and
- establishing a feedback mechanism so schools are assured that their concerns have been considered and actioned by members.

STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Improve the Education Development Plan (EDP) by:
- making explicit to schools
- how the EDP links with other key plans
- the detail of actions within activities
- the links between actions
- how actions are intended to support all schools in promoting inclusion, managing behaviour and developing effective self-review procedures; and
- consulting with primary and secondary schools on ways to establish LEA targets for higher attaining pupils.

Improve the allocation of resources to priorities by:
- instituting, in consultation with schools, a full review of education spending, including the funding formula for schools, with the aim of ensuring the legitimate needs of schools are better met;
- developing a shared and clear understanding between the authority, headteachers and governors of:

- the process and rationale for agreeing priorities and for allocating resources to them and
- the form that partnership needs to take in order achieve effective consultation related to budget making and review.

SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Improve challenge and support where this is needed by:
- ensuring that 'strategies for improvement' are discussed at target setting meetings with link advisers.

Improve monitoring, challenge, intervention and support for less secure schools by:
- rigorously quality assuring self-review procedures; and
- providing additional support where self-review procedures are not sufficiently robust, outcomes from data analysis are not sufficiently analytical and improvement strategies are not sufficiently well targeted.

Improve services deployed to support school improvement by:
- undertaking a formal annual review and evaluation of the role and function of the link adviser.

The inspection team also make the following recommendations:

SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Improve services deployed to support school improvement by:
- consulting with secondary schools to identify the range and nature of expertise currently required to effect school improvement; and
- devising a shared directory of quality-assured providers in liaison with primary, secondary and special schools.

Improve standards in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) by:
- extending its use throughout the curriculum by developing in discussion with schools a clear set of priorities for support that makes the most effective use of the available resources.

Improve support for schools causing concern by:
- communicating more effectively the process and the criteria used to determine schools causing concern to assist schools in carrying out self-reviews which complement the LEA's monitoring processes**.**

Improve support for school management by:
- establishing with schools a procedure for systematic access to the outcomes of school reviews.

Improve support for governors by:
- sending copies of visit reports containing significant evaluation on the work schools by advisers and other officers to chairs of governing bodies as a matter of course.

Improve support for post-16 education by:
- identifying, in co-operation with schools, ways to improve post 16 educational opportunities; and
- organising provision so that it is not subsidised by the diversion of resources from the 11-16 age group.

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Improve management services by:
- introducing quality assurance mechanisms which cover all services and which enable senior managers to be in touch with the quality of service received by schools;
- improving support for administrative information and communications technology, focusing particularly on hardware and systems support, and ensuring that the planned developments are effectively resourced and implemented; and
- ensuring the recently appointed education officer for planning and financial support develops effective links between schools and senior officers who can not only support financial management, but also help improve communication between schools and the LEA on financial matters.

SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION

Improve special education provision by:
- examining the possibilities for increased resource provision in the secondary sector in seeking to increase momentum towards wider inclusion;
- consulting across the LEA on a strategy and plan for inclusion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream, clearly indicating the part to be played by special, primary and secondary schools as well as provision outside the LEA; and
- developing more precise mechanisms and indicators for evaluating improvement against investment and simultaneously consulting about the most effective ways of changing the balance of funding, from statemented special educational needs towards non-statemented special educational needs in promoting increased delegation of resources to schools.

ACCESS

Improve support for pupil behaviour by:
- convening meetings of officers, members, headteachers and chairs of governing bodies to consider current practice and to develop co-operative strategies for tackling and reducing exclusions; and
- putting in place monitoring, support and evaluation arrangements to secure progress.

Improve support for child protection by:

- ensuring that a further programme of training on child protection for headteachers, designated teachers and governors is carried out.

Improve provision for minority ethnic pupils including Traveller pupils by:
- reviewing the operation of the services to ensure that support is securely focused on developing the capacity of individual schools to make their own provision for pupils, and secure appropriate training for them to do so.

Improve the LEA's capacity to tackle social exclusion by:
- developing, in consultation with the LEA's partners, a policy and action plan to secure co-ordinated action and enhance inclusion.

APPENDIX 2: BEST VALUE REVIEW OF PUPIL AND STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

The review of **pupil and student support services** took place in the first year of the Best Value review programme and was reported in March 2001. It set out to determine the extent to which financial savings and administrative improvements could be made, the level to which discretionary support should continue, given budgetary pressures on the council, and to examine future arrangements for the student loans process.

Service aims relate to the council's core value of 'promoting equal opportunities through education and access to services' and to 'promoting education for life'. The service provided meets these aims well, including maximising opportunities for young people to continue in education in a borough where higher education qualifications are low.

At the outset of the review, the council recognised that a valuable service was provided, but that there was the potential for increased delegation and reducing spending in discretionary areas. Thorough consultation was undertaken, which included the housing benefits service and social services, and a high level of user satisfaction was identified alongside areas for improvement. It established that schools did not wish to take responsibility for the assessment of free school meals and clothing/uniform grants; headteachers considered such delegation burdensome. Consultation afforded a considerable level of challenge.

Comparison with other London local authorities demonstrates a good performance from a team of average size. The authority challenged itself in considering options for the service including cessation, delegation to schools, competitive tendering and/or maintaining in-house provision.

The outcome is that services will continue to be provided in-house, but that a customer service charter will be introduced which details the level of service that can be expected from the pupil and student support team. In order to improve the service further, it will work more closely with schools, the Department of Social Security and with the Council Tax and Housing Benefits services. It will introduce the electronic delivery of services through Bexley Direct, and extend the council's GIS system to improve the team's efficiency in dealing with claims for travel assistance. Discretionary awards have been continued and the policy will be reviewed on an annual basis. The policy for travel assistance, which exceeds the Council's statutory responsibility, is to be reviewed annually.

Action planning addresses key areas which will improve the quality of service, and plans have the backing of senior officers and elected members. Actions are feasible and practical. There is evidence of progress in improved administrative arrangements, the customer charter and with the use of information and

communications technology through the council's web-site. A good service is provided and it is likely to improve still further.

APPENDIX 3: BEST VALUE REVIEW OF CLEANING SERVICES (SCHOOLS)

The council's Best Value review of **cleaning** was reported in October 2000. It covered school cleaning, and this aspect was inspected. The review was prompted by the three-year contract being due for renewal on January 1st 2002. The review covered 67 premises, including seven secondary schools and 16 primary schools. Key issues identified for the review were the frequency of cleaning and the size and organisation of central cleaning arrangements. The scope of the review included the schools outside of the contract to determine comparative levels of satisfaction.

The review links to Bexley's aim of ensuring a clean, safer and attractive place in which to live and work and the more detailed and measurable service aims and standards. The council recognised inadequacies in the quality of service provided and challenged this through the Best Value review.

Consultation was undertaken with schools to assess levels of satisfaction. Sixty per cent of primary schools were satisfied with the service, and secondary schools were dissatisfied overall. Where schools employed their own cleaners satisfaction levels were higher. The review established that schools outside of the contract were generally happy with their own arrangements. Dissatisfaction stems from concerns about staffing levels, the inadequacy of training, the quantity and deployment of cleaning materials and equipment, and the quality of communication between premises managers and cleaners. The customer survey indicated that the current service achieves minimum standards at low prices.

The council considered in-house provision, partnership, facilities management and competitive tendering as options. Tenders have been invited; the contract has been divided so there is a specific contract for schools The contract specification has been tested against industry standards. Tenders will be evaluated against key outcome areas developed from the review: staff recruitment, retention and training; materials and equipment resourcing; and communication with individual establishments and client support units.

Following the review, it became evident that few schools would wish to continue to be part of the council contract. However, a solid basis for an improved service has been put in place. Despite the small number of schools taking this up, a positive step has been made in securing quality contracts on behalf of schools that wish to benefit from the council's contracting arrangements.

Overall, an unsatisfactory cleaning service is currently provided, but action taken is effectively addressing the quality of provision. Focusing on schools as a contract block, and comparing service quality promise good improvements.

APPENDIX 4: BEST VALUE REVIEW OF CATERING (SCHOOLS)

The review of **catering**, which covered services wider than education, was reported in April 2001, and was scoped in preparation for the delegated budget for school catering.

The catering service provides hot meals to 78 schools; 65 primary and special schools and 13 secondary schools. There are 43 production kitchens and 23 schools receive their meals from the nearest production kitchen.

This is an important service in relation to the council's aim of improving health and well-being. The council places a high priority on healthy food for young people. Monitoring of meals is satisfactory through termly visits to schools, which verify that the service is provided according to the contract specification and that the nutritional values of meals are satisfactory.

Provision has been evaluated against well chosen criteria which are relevant to service aims, in particular that children whose main meal of the day is a free school meal, can receive a locally produced hot meal.

Good consultation with schools, pupils, parents and staff indicated general satisfaction with the service and a high number of schools indicated that they would remain in any future central arrangements. It identified that there is a sound level of investment in facilities. The review raises challenges for the council in highlighting areas in need of improvement both for customers, such as menu choice and healthy food options, and for staff in areas of staff resources and the supervision of pupils.

The council considered the option of ceasing its role in the school meals service, but given the satisfaction from schools it aptly proposed to explore, with potential suppliers, new long-term arrangements for the provision of school meals following the transfer of responsibility to school governing bodies. Decisions on a detailed procurement process will be undertaken in the light of market testing. In conducting this Best Value review the council is able to base future tendering arrangements on good quality customer feedback. Areas for improvement will be taken into account in developing the specification for the new contract which is due to commence in July 2002.

The catering service provides a satisfactory service to schools. The service is likely to improve as long as it maintains the link between customer feedback and service improvement.