



**OFFICE FOR STANDARDS
IN EDUCATION**

**INSPECTION OF
WARRINGTON
LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

June 2001

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

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INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection was carried out by OFSTED in conjunction with the Audit Commission under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The inspection used the *Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities (July 1999)* which focuses on the effectiveness of the local education authority (LEA) work to support school improvement. The inspection also took account of the Local Government Act 1999, insofar as it relates to work undertaken by the LEA on best value.
2. The inspection was based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA; on school inspection information; HMI monitoring reports and audit reports; on documentation and discussions with LEA members, focus groups of headteachers and governors; staff in the education department and in other council departments; diocesan representatives and representatives of the LEA's partners. Other agencies and LEA partners submitted written evidence of participation and joint working. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on aspects of the work of the LEA was circulated to schools. The response rate was 89 per cent.
3. The inspection also involved studies of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to one nursery school, eleven primary schools, four secondary schools, and two special schools. A further four schools were visited as part of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy monitoring. The visits tested the views of governors, headteachers and other staff on the key aspects of the LEA's strategy. The visits also considered whether the support that is provided by the LEA contributes, where appropriate, to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in the school, and provides value for money.

COMMENTARY

4. Warrington Borough Council is a good local education authority. It is effective in nearly all of its functions and has few weaknesses. The borough became a unitary authority and assumed responsibility for education in April 1998. Situated on the River Mersey, it serves a largely urban community with a strong economic base. Pupil attainment is above the national average. It is at least in line with similar authorities and above this level at Key Stage 1. School inspections have found many good schools, and few schools have been identified that require considerable improvement.

5. In 1998, the new Warrington LEA inherited schools that were performing well but also became one of the lowest funded LEAs in the country. The pockets of social and economic deprivation in the town are not sufficiently large to trigger additional resources, either through the Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) or through government initiatives targeted at economic and social deprivation and additional educational need. The council has made education a top priority; it now spends seven per cent above its SSA, and ensures that delegation to schools is high. Central costs are pared down, both corporately and through the operation of a very small central team in the education department.

6. Relationships with schools are very good; morale is high and schools find that their development needs are attended to well. The high regard for the leadership given by the director of education is well placed. The LEA has been successful in recruiting a small team of high calibre officers and advisers who have won the confidence and trust of the schools. They provide highly responsive services on both traded and retained bases. The LEA set out to get to know the schools well, to be close at hand, accessible, and willing to respond swiftly to their views on service delivery; features on which the schools comment favourably.

7. The LEA aims to support schools in raising standards by focusing its efforts on supporting school management and governance to promote autonomy and continuous improvement. The inspection found many examples of the LEA making a positive contribution to good governance and management in schools. Its task, as it begins to consider the strategy to take the service forward from 2002, is to achieve more differentiated deployment of central resources and to restructure the means by which schools access support and advice.

8. The LEA carries out nearly all of its functions well. Particular strengths are:

- its ability to target resources on the priorities it has established;
- consultation with schools and a shared understanding of the LEA role in monitoring, challenging and intervening in schools;
- the strategic planning, effectiveness and value for money of school improvement functions across the department;
- support to schools for the provision of performance data, raising standards of literacy, for schools causing concern, for the early years and for school management and governance;
- its ability to achieve co-ordinated action in partnership with other agencies;
- support for human resource management in schools;

- admissions to schools;
- support for attendance, behaviour and support for children in public care;
- the health, safety and welfare of children; and
- the effectiveness of measures to combat social exclusion.

9. Aspects of its work that are currently unsatisfactory and require further development to reach the high standards the council has set for itself include:

- support to schools for raising pupil attainment in information and communication technology;
- improving schools' understanding of Best Value;
- support for gifted and talented children; and
- registering the provision for education other than at school.

10. The elected members play an appropriate role in relation to the officers and have set out clear expectations, both for the education service, and for their priority for social inclusion. Thus, corporate priorities sit closely with schools' priorities, and the leadership of the council ensures that plans for economic and social development are linked closely to plans for the development of the education service.

11. The small central team, and the structure of the department, ensures that communication within the department is very good. However, the demands made upon officers and advisers are high. They seek to balance the demand from all schools for the high quality services they offer with an imperative to focus their efforts on the small number of schools with identified weaknesses. The LEA responds speedily to improve aspects of service delivery, identified by its monitoring, or because of requests from schools. This means that sometimes the opportunity to make a considered evaluation of alternative strategies for service delivery has not been taken. Thus, plans for the medium term development of its school improvement strategy are less well articulated than its priorities for the first three years as a new unitary authority.

12. Nevertheless, the LEA's ability to manage change is proven. The intelligence it has about school performance and management capacity is well developed, and it has an appropriate balance of skills and expertise in the officers and advisers. Warrington LEA has the capacity, and the commitment, to improve further and to take action in response to the recommendations made in this report.

SECTION ONE: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

13. Warrington Borough Council serves a population of 191,000 and became a unitary authority in April 1998. In January 2001, unemployment, at 2.6 per cent, was below the national average. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is below the national average, 12.7 per cent in primary schools against a national average of 19.7 per cent, and 11.4 per cent in secondary schools compared to 17.6 per cent nationally. The proportion of pupils of ethnic minority heritage, at 2.0 per cent, is well below the national average of 12.1 per cent. The borough has some sharp contrasts between deprivation and prosperity. According to the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions Index of Deprivation, one quarter of the wards are amongst the 20 per cent most deprived in England, whilst a further quarter are in the list of the 20 per cent least deprived. Overall, the context of the LEA has more features of advantage than disadvantage.

14. The borough offers nursery education provision for three and four year-olds in maintained and non-maintained settings, including nursery classes and nursery schools. Eighteen per cent of primary and nursery school pupils are below compulsory school age. Transfer to secondary schools is at age eleven. The LEA maintains 90 schools, comprising:

Nursery schools	1
Primary schools (of which 33 are voluntary and 41 community)	74
Secondary schools (of which 2 are voluntary aided and 1 voluntary controlled):	
for 11-16 year olds	5
for 11-18 year olds	7
Special schools	3
Pupil Referral Units	0

15. There are 17,876 pupils in nursery and primary schools, 13,564 pupils in secondary schools and 283 pupils in special schools, a total LEA school population of 31,723 pupils. Thirty pupils are educated otherwise than at school and 135 pupils maintained with statements of special educational need (SEN) are educated in special schools in other LEAs, independent schools and non-maintained special schools. Thirty-three per cent of pupils with statements are educated in special schools, which is below the national average. The LEA maintains statements of SEN for 2.2 per cent of pupils of primary school age, this is below the national figure of 2.7 per cent and 4.1 per cent of secondary age pupils, which is in line with the national figure of 4.0 per cent.

Performance

16. A detailed analysis of the performance of schools in Warrington has been supplied to the LEA in the form of the LEA statistical profile, from which some of the following information has been extracted:

- OFSTED school inspection reports since 1996 indicate that in a quarter of schools pupils enter with good levels of attainment and in over a third they enter education with poor levels. This indicates a lower level of attainment than similar authorities¹ and is broadly in line with the national picture;
- results in the 2000 national tests in English, mathematics and science for 11 and 14 year-olds were in line with those achieved in similar authorities and above this level for seven year-olds. They were above the national averages for all three age groups;
- the GCSE examination results in 2000 were in line with similar authorities, and the national average, in terms of the percentage of pupils gaining five or more grades A* to C. The percentage gaining one or more grades A* to G was, however, well above the national average;
- the progress made by pupils between Key Stages 1 and 2 is broadly in line with the average progress made by all LEAs. The rate of progress between Key Stages 2 and 3 is also close to the average. However, the progress made by pupils between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 is well above average;
- the percentage of primary schools judged to be good or very good by OFSTED inspections is in line with similar authorities and nationally. The rate of progress made by primary schools between inspections is good, with fewer schools deemed to require improvements after the second inspection;
- the percentage of secondary schools judged to be good or very good is well above the national average and above similar authorities;
- the quality of teaching graded good in recent inspections in primary schools was in line with other LEAs. In secondary schools, it was better than the average for all LEAs;
- the rates of permanent exclusions in both primary (0.1 per 1000) and secondary schools (1.9 per 1000) were below the respective national figures in 2000; and
- attendance in primary schools (95.4 per cent) was well above the national average of 94.3 per cent in 2000 and the rate of unauthorised absence (0.3 per cent) was below the national figure. Attendance in secondary schools (91.9 per cent) was 0.5 per cent above the national figure, and the rate of unauthorised absence (0.5 per cent) was half the national figure.

Funding

¹ Warrington's statistical neighbours are: Bury, South Gloucestershire, Torbay, Poole, York, Warwickshire, West Sussex, Solihull, Stockton-on-Tees and Dudley.

17. Funding for Warrington is comparatively low, only five LEAs in the country have a lower SSA per pupil for education. However, since vesting, the council has acted swiftly to direct resources to its new priorities as a unitary authority, and the funding for education has been increased significantly. It currently spends seven per cent (£5.7 million) above SSA on education. Nevertheless, although expenditure on non-school provision, such as adult education and the youth service is relatively low, the Local Schools Budget (LSB) is still substantially below the unitary average² by £223 per pupil.

18. In order to maximise the amount available for delegation to schools, the LEA has appropriately and tightly controlled its central expenditure, retaining about £100 per pupil less than average. Examples of some of the Fair Funding categories are shown below:

Fair Funding Category	Warrington (£/pupil)	Unitary average (£/pupil)
Administration and strategy	74	84
School Improvement	17	25
Special Needs	126	152
Access	40	62
Retained Standards Fund	22	53

19. Consequently, the level of delegation is higher than average at 86.4 per cent. Although the amount of the Individual Schools Budget (ISB) delegated to schools is comparatively better than the LSB position, it is still £130 per pupil lower than average, at £2219 compared to £2349. Government targets for increased expenditure on schools have all been met. Where possible, grant funding has been accessed but the overall amount is very modest owing to Warrington's socio-economic profile, which precludes it from most areas of grant aid.

20. Monitoring and control of school and central budgets are sound. There are no significant school deficits or central overspends. There is mild and justifiable concern, by officers and members about school balances, in that about sixty per cent of schools have balances in excess of five per cent of ISB, although only a handful are in excess of fifteen per cent. However, schools are properly required to report their intentions and steps are being taken to encourage the use of such funds in line with Audit Commission recommendations.

21. Although the District Auditor has shown some concern over slippage in corporate capital projects, this does not apply in education where investment has increased from £4.8 million in 1998 to £8.9 million currently. This involves a range of funding streams, including successful bids for government grants and a public/private partnership.

Council structure

² Unless stated otherwise, funding averages given are for all unitary authorities.

22. Since May 2000, the borough council has 60 elected members: 43 Labour, 13 Liberal Democrat and 4 Conservative. The education and lifelong learning committee is one of five service committees and is supported by three crosscutting panels for children and young people; the EDP; and lifelong learning. A scrutiny committee for policy review and development has been formed to scrutinise the council's operations and a community consultation exercise on options for change has been undertaken, under the auspices of a broadly based modernising commission. Although elected members have been appointed as pledge guardians to champion the seven pledges made in the community plan, and are discharging the role with increasing confidence, there are few opportunities for other members to take on new roles. Major changes to the council structure and operation have not been made as they are the subjects of a two-year plan for review and restructuring. In the meantime, decision making is prompt and the senior members meet regularly with chief officers to oversee policy and operations.

The Education Development Plan

23. The Education Development Plan (EDP) provides a sound basis for school improvement. It was approved by the Secretary of State, with only the general conditions that applied to all LEAs. The plan draws on a detailed audit of socio-economic needs, but does not make sufficiently clear the strategies to be employed to deal with the identified diversity of needs, although in practice this is addressed well. The plan focuses more on the needs in primary schools than on secondary schools.

24. Some of the targets within the plan have been revised. The interim targets for eleven year-olds in English and mathematics were insufficiently challenging, being exceeded in both subjects in 2000, and for the previous two years in English. The LEA needs a four per cent increase to reach the 2002 target of 83 per cent in English and looks set to achieve, if not exceed, the target. In mathematics, however, there is still a seven per cent increase to be achieved by 2002. The target of 81 per cent is a more challenging one to achieve but schools' response to the LEA challenge suggests that the target will be met. In secondary schools, the gap between the interim targets for sixteen-year-olds and the actual level of achievement is growing. The ambitious 2002 target of 56 per cent at five grades A*-C in the GCSE examinations looks unlikely to be achieved at the current rate of improvement. This has been recognised by the LEA and increased resources are being targeted at improvement in secondary schools. The target for reducing exclusions to 28 pupils by 2002 is on course to be achieved.

25. Taken as a whole, the plan consists of a coherent range of activities and good links are made within it to other important strategic plans, such as the school organisation plan and the asset management plan. It takes as its core objectives the need for the new unitary authority to get to know the schools well, to be very visible in supporting schools and to assist them by celebrating success and sharing good practice. The priorities reflect local need and policies, although the priority to support, challenge and work in partnership with schools contains a somewhat eclectic mix of activities. Each, in itself, is worthy of pursuit but the links between the activities are not well made. The plan was revised for

2000/2001 and this has helped to clarify actions and improve coherence. Nevertheless, the link between needs identified in the audit and activities to address those needs is still not clear in some areas.

26. Monitoring processes are rigorous, both through the internal departmental structure that separates monitoring of implementation from the responsibility to implement planned actions, and through responses from schools. There are, however, too few opportunities taken to subject the outcomes of the plan to rigorous and systematic evaluation. A members' panel exists to review progress. Performance against planned activities is covered well but the reports give insufficient evaluative commentary to inform members. Building coherent strategies for evaluation into plans is not a prominent feature of the LEA's work.

27. The plan's strengths are apparent in its successful implementation. Progress is good, except for priority five: to narrow gaps in attainment between different groups and ensure that exceptionally able pupils are challenged to achieve as they should, where it has been slower than in the other priorities. Overall, the programme for school improvement is feasible. It is relevant to local needs and is focused on promoting school autonomy by improving management and governance in schools. Schools are involved fully in the formulation and revision of the plan and the priorities are embedded well in their development plans. Officers are seeking to integrate school and departmental planning cycles to improve further the targeting and management of resources for school improvement. The improvements made in performance in primary schools shows that the implementation is working well for them. In secondary schools, however, there is less evidence of impact, a matter of concern to officers who have started to implement strategies to address this.

The allocation of resources to priorities

28. The council has good mechanisms for ensuring its scarce resources are targeted to achieve maximum benefit. Planned changes to the budget setting process should further improve this position. Although the SSA is very low, the council is making effective use of the funding available.

29. The council's commitment to raising standards is evident from its financial investment in education. The emphasis on prioritising schools' budgets has resulted in a lean education department, with high levels of delegation. The formula for distribution is generally well understood by schools, being simple, clear and rational. Schools are very appreciative of the regular, comprehensive reviews of the formula and potential areas for delegation, and display a high level of trust and regard for the officers concerned. Schools are particularly appreciative of the willingness of officers and members to engage in open debate on controversial resourcing issues. Recent work has involved targeting resources at Key Stages 1 and 3; a benchmarking analysis of primary and secondary funding and spending; and a transparent analysis of central expenditure.

30. Schools are provided with indicative and final budgets in good time for their planning purposes and they also receive, albeit on paper, materials to help with

budget predictions. The LEA has been particularly successful in its redistribution of funds for special needs. This enabled schools to take more responsibility for making effective provision for their pupils, a move that gained almost universal approbation during school visits.

31. The chief executive has secured the agreement of elected members for a new approach to budget setting. This links budget allocation to the pledges set out in the Community/Best Value Plan and is in accordance with recommendations by the District Auditor. The education department is well placed to adopt the new approach. Budgets are matched well to need and, shortly after its inception robust mechanisms for monitoring and controlling budgets were introduced, making service managers fully accountable. Therefore, central budgets are tightly under control, even in areas such as transport and special needs where controlling expenditure is often very difficult.

Best Value preparations

32. The council's initial strategy for Best Value (BV) reviews was insufficiently resourced, resulting in slippage to the original review programme. Consequently, there were no completed reviews ready for inspection in the education department. However, recent rapid progress has been made. A corporate infrastructure has been created and overall arrangements are now satisfactory. The programme of reviews has, rightly, been modified. Some reviews have been broadened and others brought forward where the LEA has concerns about performance or costs. The education department's determination to secure good value for money and continuous improvement is being enhanced by the adoption of the corporate performance management system.

33. Understanding of BV principles in schools is very poor and, because of slippage in the programme, school staffs have had little experience or involvement in the process. Governors do not report to the LEA on how they propose to apply BV principles to their schools. Although they have been sent some explanatory materials, governors have been inappropriately led to believe that BV will be secured simply by purchasing LEA services.

Recommendation:

In order to increase the impact of Best Value in education:

- ensure that more detailed information is provided to improve the understanding of BV principles and practice in schools and in the department; and
- provide guidance to schools on how BV can be used to aid school improvement.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Implications of other functions

34. The council has made education funding an essential priority. The education department has been restructured and this has helped to ensure good co-ordination of school improvement actions. The strong lead given by the council in achieving co-ordinated, inter-agency, partnerships is particularly effective in linking lifelong learning and community projects to schools. Special educational needs services support school improvement and the LEA's strategies to combat social exclusion, particularly to secure good attendance and for children in public care, are effective. School organisation and asset management planning are closely aligned to raising standards. Financial support services have proved responsive to the needs of schools and human resources support has been particularly effective.

Monitoring, challenge, support, intervention

35. Pupil performance is better than national averages; teaching is generally sound, and is improving; few schools have had major weaknesses identified, and the cost of the central provision is low. LEA services are effective and offer good value for money.

36. The LEA has set out clearly its approach to monitoring, challenge, support and intervention and is implementing effectively the Code of Practice for LEA-School Relations. Schools were involved closely in the drafting of the EDP and understand well the implications of high delegation. Centrally retained costs for school improvement are low and, at £17 per pupil, are well below the average for unitary authorities. Despite this, schools receive a high level of support in line with their development needs. This support is provided through the EDP priorities and without schools needing to purchase additional LEA advice. It was highly effective in over two thirds of the schools visited. They understand the LEA strategy to support the leadership and management of autonomous schools and make good use of it to promote improvement. Schools purchase training from a range of providers, including neighbouring LEAs. The LEA has involved schools fully in the development of a partnership for INSET brokerage.

37. As a newly formed unitary authority, Warrington LEA wanted schools to benefit from a small team of advisers and consultants who were accessible and responsive to schools' needs, and who actively disseminated good practice. Each cluster of schools, based on a secondary school and its linked primary schools, receives a high level of effective adviser support. The LEA challenges schools to improve through the link advisers' work with governing bodies, and through the termly monitoring discussions with school managers about pupil performance and school improvement strategies. At the same time, the advisers offer support and advice to address weaknesses in management and teaching identified by LEA monitoring or by school self-evaluation. Nevertheless, in two secondary schools, there was some confusion between the monitoring and accountability functions of their adviser and the advice offered to support the school's development needs.

38. Whilst this proved a very effective and appropriate strategy for the first three years of the authority, it lacks sufficient differentiation to guarantee that LEA centrally retained resources are focused on the areas of greatest need. School access to link adviser support, and any specialist input brokered by the adviser, is constrained only by the adviser's availability. Advisers work very hard to ensure that, in addition to their monitoring, challenge and intervention duties, school development demands are met. Their advice, for the most part, is held in very high regard by schools and demand is high.

39. Good strategies are used to supplement the work of the link advisers. For example, a member of the departmental management team is linked to each secondary school to provide additional support to school management and external consultants are procured when appropriate. Advisory team meetings focus on effective improvement strategies and are used to identify and share good practice between schools.

40. The LEA has used the full range of its powers to intervene in schools causing concern. The number of schools identified by OFSTED as causing concern is low, and judicious use is made of intervention strategies in the few schools identified in this category by the LEA. The success of its challenge and support strategies lies in the small number of schools with identified weaknesses, the success of its monitoring and intervention strategies lies in the speed with which weaknesses are identified, addressed and resolved.

41. Both branches of the department, each under the leadership of an assistant director, have school improvement as their core function. They are led well, with the rigorous monitoring processes of the strategic management, planning and access branch linked well to the provision made by the school improvement and learning support branch. The chief adviser provides purposeful and effective leadership to the advisers and consultants. She monitors the impact of their work closely and ensures that the objectives set are linked to service needs. Despite the open-ended nature of schools' entitlement to support, resources are generally deployed well. Advisers are well qualified and training is given a high profile, so that schools receive a good quality service from the LEA.

42. The director, with the strategic management, planning and access branch, secures coherent strategic planning across the department, linked well to internal departmental planning processes, corporate planning and schools. A strong performance management culture is developing under his leadership.

Collection and analysis of performance data

43. Data collection and analysis, and its use by officers and schools, are good. From its inception, the LEA has seen the collection and use of data as an essential element in supporting school improvement. The range of data analyses has increased steadily and their use has had a positive impact on target setting and raising standards. Value-added data development is giving schools and officers useful information about how successful schools have been in enabling pupils to make progress during their time at school. Pupil performance data are

also analysed clearly by gender and ethnicity, although there are very small numbers of pupils from minority ethnic groups attending most Warrington schools. The electronic transfer of performance data is not established, but the LEA is putting the infrastructure into place for this to happen in the near future.

44. The able school effectiveness team provides comprehensive data for schools, supported by helpful explanations and guidance. The information is presented clearly, and schools find it accessible and useful. Primary schools make good use of the information, especially in the target-setting process and secondary schools find the subject data useful when looking at the strengths and weaknesses of their performance. The use of the information is not developed fully as schools are not yet able to compare themselves with similar schools by identifying them from the data.

45. The school effectiveness team works closely with advisers to ensure that data are understood and are used well in their work with schools. Link advisers make good use of the data in the target-setting process in the autumn term. This process has a high degree of challenge; schools find it a robust and fair procedure. The analysis of data is timely and gives the LEA information about its schools before national data information is available.

46. Good training opportunities are provided for governors and senior school staff to enable them to gain a clear understanding of the data. The head of the school effectiveness team is skilled in her field, she is proactive in supporting schools' use of data, and she works with individual schools to help them develop their data analyses. Several heads rightly see the availability of the LEA school performance data as being an important part of their own performance management evidence.

Support for literacy

47. Support for literacy is good, despite early staffing problems that meant the LEA made a slow start in implementing the national strategy. Standards in key stages 1, 2 and 3 are all above the national averages, although after rapid rises in 1998 and 1999, the rate of improvement in 2000 slowed. The overall high level of achievement masks a significant difference in pupils' achievement in writing and reading at the end of Key Stage 2. In writing, 54 per cent of pupils attained level 4 or above compared to 86 per cent in reading.

48. Raising standards in literacy is an EDP priority, which sets out clearly how the LEA intends to work with schools. The English adviser provides good leadership to the literacy consultants, whose work is of good quality. The team is enthusiastic, knowledgeable and well regarded by schools. There has been an increase in training during the last year, as the central team has reached its full complement of two consultants. The training has been received positively by those who attend. It includes provision for classroom assistants and for some attendees this is usefully linked to a NVQ level 3 qualification at a local college.

49. Support to primary schools is effective and, although limited, the support to secondary schools has been helpful. A programme of summer schools has run

and particular work, such as strengthening the teaching of English in a secondary school, has been effective. Primary schools are identified sensibly for intensive literacy support, based on National Curriculum results as well as other valid criteria. This support is well planned, well regarded by schools and is effective in raising standards in literacy.

50. LEA initiatives enhance the national strategy work and successfully contribute to the growing effectiveness of literacy teaching and learning, especially in primary schools. Writing is necessarily an important focus in the LEA's drive to raise standards and meet the 2002 target. Several schools are working closely with the LEA to develop materials to support writing. Good links are formed with other LEA teams and officers, particularly with the numeracy strategy team, to ensure well planned support for schools. Links with the advisory team are strong.

Support for numeracy

51. The support for numeracy is satisfactory, with its strengths outweighing the weaknesses that the LEA has taken steps to address. Standards in mathematics are above the national average at the end of Key Stages 1, 2 and 3.

52. The LEA's strategy for raising standards in mathematics is set out clearly in the EDP. Although this is a sound programme of action, the LEA did not deploy sufficient staff to meet the needs of schools. The implementation of the strategy is managed satisfactorily. The numeracy consultant's work is of good quality and is highly regarded by schools; she is knowledgeable and has a good understanding of the mathematics curriculum.

53. The numeracy team has had a heavy workload owing to its small size. This situation has been addressed by establishing additional consultant posts and by reducing the number of link schools that the numeracy adviser works with, but the LEA has only recently been able to recruit a Key Stage 3 consultant to start in September 2001. A temporary and pragmatic solution has been taken to appoint the existing primary consultant to this role for the summer term, to plan for the Key Stage 3 strategy.

54. The central training is of good quality. Training offered to individual schools that work with the consultant is well planned to address particular needs. However, there was little extra capacity to deal with other needs when they arose. Booster class training was planned with the literacy team, and the two teams now meet regularly to plan strategy developments. There are good links between the numeracy team and the advisers.

55. The leading mathematics teachers make a successful contribution to the numeracy support provided by the LEA. The consultant works closely with the leading mathematics teachers; all but three primary schools have observed lessons taught by them. Support for secondary schools has been limited. The LEA's partnership with Warrington rugby league club has provided useful resources to support teaching and learning in mathematics.

Support for information and communication technology

56. Although some aspects of the support for information and communications technology (ICT) have strengths, the overall impact of the provision is unsatisfactory. Curriculum support has shortcomings because originally the focus was on implementing the National Grid for Learning strategy. This gave priority to providing equipment but lacked support for curriculum development in schools within a council framework for ICT. These shortcomings have been recognised by the LEA. An assistant director has recently been given the task to co-ordinate and improve the overall strategy. Initially, a clear strategy for ICT curriculum development was not included in the EDP, which was a weakness. It was added after the first year review and now sets out more clearly the work the LEA plans to do to support schools.

57. The plans for implementing the National Grid for Learning strategy did not start positively and, although this work has improved, there are still vestiges of the confusion created. The council lacks an overall strategy for ICT that links together development work in the schools, the education department and the council. The department has concentrated its support, appropriately, on the primary phase, as this was where the greatest need was identified. Consequently, some secondary schools have not received the support they sought to develop their ICT capacity. For example, one school has created its own ICT suite without the benefit of advice, other than a lengthy critique of its ICT development plan.

58. However, work by the ICT adviser in primary schools, including three visited during the inspection, has been effective in supporting development planning and purchase of equipment. The reduction in his commitments as a link adviser has enabled him to complete more work supporting schools with ICT. Part-time teacher consultants were appointed and the training they offer has also contributed to an improvement in staff using computers to support teaching and learning and in pupils gaining confidence to use ICT equipment. The LEA has recognised that it needs to increase its capacity to support schools well and has recently appointed a full-time ICT consultant. This is timely as the original part-time teacher consultants have reduced in number due to pressures of work.

59. An important response to weaknesses identified has been a well-planned programme of advisers monitoring ICT provision and standards that is almost complete. The resulting report, together with the information from inspection reports, is to be used appropriately to plan curriculum development and should address some of the main deficiencies in the strategy adopted in the first two years.

60. There are satisfactory links between the adviser and staff based in the SEN education support team who offer support to schools for using ICT to assist individual pupils with SEN in their learning. Network and high school co-ordinator meetings, to which all schools are invited, enable teachers and LEA staff to discuss issues that arise in schools. However, these meetings are not always well attended by teachers and, therefore, are not fully effective.

Support for schools causing concern

61. The support for schools causing concern is good. Clear procedures are set out in the EDP as to how the LEA will work with schools that need significant support. However, the documentation does not fully describe current procedures, as they have been developed to improve the response of the LEA to schools. In practice, the LEA has a good knowledge of its schools and usually provides well-targeted and focused support.

62. The LEA has been successful in supporting the few schools judged by OFSTED to require special measures, or have serious weaknesses, to improve the quality of the education in a reasonable amount of time. Currently the LEA has two schools deemed to require special measures and one with serious weaknesses. A further six schools receive extra support as they cause concern. No secondary schools are in these categories. The LEA is successful in supporting schools that it judges to be causing concern, which contributes to the low numbers identified by OFSTED inspections as needing significant improvement.

63. Officers across the LEA contribute to identifying weaknesses in schools and the advisory team co-ordinates the necessary support. Although the procedures are clear, in one school the process of intervention was not handled well, although the judgements made by the advisers were broadly correct. In another, the LEA has taken insufficient action to challenge and strengthen the senior management of the school. However, in a third school, it has been very effective in tackling the causes for concern in a systematic way, which is leading to improvement. Officers learn quickly from any shortcomings in supporting schools and ensure that these are not repeated. Five schools were visited during the inspection that were causing concern and in all but one, the support was both valued and effective.

64. Advisers monitor the work of all schools closely and senior staff are appropriately involved with monitoring the progress of those causing concern and the impact of the advisers' work. Although the LEA evaluates its work in schools causing concern, both internally and using outside consultants, the results are not systematically informing changes to written policy and practice that is shared with schools. The departmental management team meets regularly to discuss schools causing concern, and the progress they are making to address the weaknesses. This area of LEA work is given an appropriately high priority by senior officers.

Support for governors

65. The support provided to governors is good. The LEA is effective in meeting its statutory responsibilities in this area. Officers place a high priority on ensuring that governing bodies are well informed about their roles and responsibilities. The LEA has successfully reduced the number of LEA governor vacancies through a number of effective initiatives.

66. The support strategy of the LEA is grounded in providing high quality support services through service level agreements. The strategy includes involving

governors closely in policy through consultation; giving information and responding to governors' requests; ensuring that training for governors is relevant and of good quality; and strengthening the work of governing bodies by ensuring that each termly meeting is attended by the school's link adviser.

67. This strategy has been effective and has enabled the LEA to develop good relations with governing bodies and to strengthen school governance. Governors are well informed about LEA issues and priorities through a variety of means. These include the informative director's briefing to chairs of governors; the recently introduced briefing for LEA governors; a readable newsletter; and a help-line staffed by knowledgeable and enthusiastic officers. The training for governors is of good quality and is responsive to their needs. Link governors meet regularly with the head of the governors' support service to discuss the training programme. The LEA offers bespoke school training sessions and general courses, which are often planned and presented by advisers and officers. The induction programme is also effective in ensuring that new governors are well briefed about their roles and responsibilities.

68. The support strategy has been successful in supporting the work of governors and was appropriate for a newly formed LEA and its first EDP. However, the time given by the advisory service to support and challenge governing bodies is insufficiently differentiated to recognise their stages of development and the overall effectiveness of schools.

Support for school management

69. Support for school management is good. The LEA makes good use of national programmes to support the development of senior staff in schools, and supplements these with a variety of other activities and training opportunities. The LEA provides few courses itself, but has developed a promising INSET brokerage scheme, which is managed by officers and co-ordinated by a management group of headteachers and officers.

70. An adviser actively and successfully leads on promoting the national leadership programmes to senior school personnel as an effective tool for their development. The LEA advisory team has involved itself significantly in school self-evaluation; this is a very important element of its school improvement work. Advisers have led the OFSTED self-evaluation training, which has been well received by headteachers. The LEA has also looked at the practice in other local LEAs to develop school self-evaluation, which is successfully extending its work with a group of pilot schools. Advisers work closely with headteachers on school development planning and provide good support to management development.

71. A new well-planned programme of training headteacher mentors has begun to strengthen the support available for the significant number of new headteachers that start in Warrington each year. Some schools are beginning to encounter difficulties with teacher recruitment, although this is not as pressing an issue in this LEA as it is in some others. Headteachers report that there is considerable competition in the area to fill posts as early as possible, with

shortages in some secondary subjects. Officers believe, with some justification, that the active promotion of good teaching through initiatives such as the Advanced Skills and Leading Teachers schemes will support the LEA's prime objective to retain and develop successful teachers.

72. Funding for training subject leaders has been provided through links with a charitable foundation. It has been well received and involves advisers and senior officers as trainers. A useful development is the work on producing a subject leader's file which is being worked on by advisers and teachers.

73. Support for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) is very well organised and managed. An adviser maintains excellent records about all aspects of NQT deployment and involves all link advisers in ensuring that NQTs are well supported by their schools. The LEA hosts twilight meetings on a variety of subjects, which sometimes have a training element. It increasingly supports individual school training events that are open to NQTs. These are well attended and valued by NQTs.

Support for early years

74. Support for early years is an EDP priority and is of good quality. The LEA moved swiftly to ensure that all four year-olds are offered places in LEA maintained settings and all three year-olds can have a place in either a voluntary, private or maintained setting. There has been significant progress made in this area of provision and LEA officers work closely with the early years childcare development partnership. Schools regard the support they receive for early years from the LEA as good.

75. The early years adviser and development officer work closely together on developing provision. Both are knowledgeable, determined and effective in their work, and they have a clear vision of how to ensure that young children receive a good quality and well-planned education. The only nursery school in the LEA is being developed appropriately as a resource centre. The LEA is also bidding for it to become a centre of excellence. Support for young children with special education needs is a significant focus of the LEA and a number of maintained settings have places set aside for children with SEN. These settings are well supported by the LEA in their work.

76. Well-planned training was provided by the early years adviser for staff in all settings in preparation for the foundation stage implementation. The children's information service is funded mainly by the LEA and is becoming well used by the community; it recently received its thousandth caller. Good links have been established with social services in early years provision.

77. The LEA has established good links with early years settings. The teacher mentors who support clusters of voluntary and private settings are regarded well. Good use is made of the information contained in inspection reports of settings to guide the work of the early years team when supporting early years practitioners. The LEA is working hard to strengthen early years provision, liaising with the

health authority for a Sure Start programme, and developing family learning projects to draw in the voluntary and private sectors.

Recommendations:

In order to clarify further the use of LEA resources for monitoring, challenge and support in the 2002 EDP:

- separately identify the funding which the LEA retains in order to carry out its functions under the School Standards and Framework Act, and that which is devolved to schools for the purpose of purchasing curriculum support; and
- develop the existing internal monitoring systems so that in future the purpose and deployment of advisers' time is made more transparent to schools.

In order to improve the ICT infrastructure and extend the application of ICT in schools:

- ensure that the implementation and communication of the LEA strategy for curriculum development is accorded a high priority;
- develop and implement a strategy for the ICT infrastructure that includes council objectives and school priorities; and
- involve schools, particularly secondary schools, in targeting LEA ICT support and advice at their needs.

In order to promote the more efficient use of advisers' time:

- ensure that, in the next EDP, sufficient differentiation is planned into the level of support provided by advisers to governing bodies to take into account the strengths of some and the needs of others.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate planning

78. Corporate plans are presented clearly. They are based on sound audits and make explicit what the council has identified needs to be addressed. They are less clear when describing the specific actions the council intends to take to meet these needs. The school organisation plan, asset management plan and class size plan are linked well to the EDP. Overall, corporate plans focus well on tackling disadvantage.

79. The Community/Best Value Performance Plan is an attractive and accessible document that is kept under constant review. Responsibilities for meeting targets and managing activities are clear, and are set out in a fashion that is designed to encourage members of the public to make contact with lead officers and members. Plans in general contain a strong sense of commitment to, and a willingness to engage with, the community served by the authority.

80. There is a weakness in the delegated framework for the education service. The scheme of delegation to the director of education has not been amended to take account of his responsibilities as a result of the School Standards and Framework Act 1997, particularly concerning the powers to intervene in schools. However, this has been recognised and a full review of delegation is planned for the second year of the corporate restructuring.

83. Elected members have proved able and willing to respond speedily, and to act decisively. This has been particularly evident in the council's response to the very low SSA for education by finding resources to meet the priority for education and for delegation to schools. In 2001/02, members have committed a further £4m to service priorities across the council by reducing central support costs. Members play an active and appropriate role in the strategic management of the education service. They are briefed well by officers. The scrutiny function of the council, introduced at the start of the corporate restructure, is developing effectively and reveals a willingness to review the impact and effectiveness of the council's actions. Many members also play an active role in school governance.

84. The leadership given by senior officers is good. It is held in high regard by schools and other stakeholders in the education service. The director of education, in particular, is respected for his openness, integrity and willingness to listen. He, and his senior colleagues, have managed the establishment of the education department well and have gained the trust of the wider education service during the last three years.

85. The council, under the energetic leadership of the chief executive, has proved particularly effective in promoting partnerships and co-ordinating action within the borough. For example, the council has taken the lead in community governance through the Warrington partnership, a forerunner to the local strategic partnership. Economic partnerships, with the council playing a strong strategic and facilitating role, are well established. It has been proactive in achieving very good collaboration between agencies, in line with its priority for social inclusion, in

areas such as community safety, health and drugs. The Warrington learning partnership has taken the initiative, in advance of regional funding, to lead a review of post-16 provision and a proposed 14 -19 Forum for the borough. The director of education chairs the local management group for the Cheshire and Warrington Connexions Partnership, which has received national pilot funding. Community focused projects to promote family learning and basic skills are linked well to the work of schools through the active lifelong learning section.

Management services

86. Warrington provides its schools with an appropriate range of services, all of which provide at least sound value for money. Arrangements for trading are satisfactory with some good aspects. There is a sensible strategy of corporate provision of some services, with technical officers located in and dedicated to the education department. Service level agreements (SLAs) are generally clear, well presented, offer a reasonable amount of choice and are delivered in good time for schools to plan adequately for their needs. However, no such detailed service specifications are provided for non-traded services. Mechanisms for gauging customer satisfaction are good, and the data from the annual survey help to improve service delivery.

87. **Financial support** is matched well to schools' needs. A range of services is available and 90 per cent of primary schools buy in at some level, although no secondary schools do. All secondary schools employ their own bursars and have their own monitoring systems. The LEA works with schools to monitor expenditure effectively, offers briefing sessions for school bursars, and is moving at a sensible pace toward universal cheque book accounting. Audit is appropriately risk based, and steps are being taken to improve the presentation of reports, following criticism by schools. Consequently, schools' budgets are sound and, where it operates, the school budget officer service is well regarded

88. However, schools' access to the data held centrally is limited by the systems used and three schools visited found financial reports unhelpful. The inability of schools to interrogate such information on-line reduces its potential to contribute to school improvement, as does the fact that pupil records are not transferred electronically (see paragraph 43 above).

89. **Personnel support** is universally, and rightly, regarded as excellent. Apart from the administrative support, to which all schools subscribe, Warrington is supporting school improvement by making innovative use of resources to carry out some novel work on absence and stress management. Schools are provided with absence data, and absent teachers are visited with a view to agreeing sensitive, staged arrangements to ease the return to work. Consequently, absence has already been reduced by ten per cent and, since the council took responsibility for education in 1998, over 130 casework files have been resolved, mostly in the difficult areas of competence and discipline. In addition, a review of the personnel handbook has been completed, and the comprehensive range of training events for heads, advisers, governors and school clerical staff has been received well.

90. Support for schools' **administrative ICT** systems is satisfactory and improving. This is a non-traded service, being subject to a SLA with the corporate ICT section. Recent moves to install new hardware into all schools have been well received, as has the decision to provide a common administrative platform. Although somewhat late in the day, rapid progress is now being made, good training and support are available, arrangements for pupil data collection are in hand, and increasing use is made of e-mail to reduce the high level of paper transactions. However, the strategy for linking administrative systems to other systems to provide a management tool for schools is underdeveloped, and there is no plan for increasing heads' awareness of its potential. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, the speed of effective action is rightly recognised by schools. The LEA has sensibly brought forward its BV reviews of **school transport** and **catering** to ensure it is purchasing the best possible service on behalf of its schools. Support for **buildings maintenance** is improving as the need for, and training in, a more customer-focused approach has been identified and is taking effect. Secondary schools have yet to be convinced fully but over 80 per cent of primary schools buy into the service at some level, with increasing levels of customer satisfaction being reported.

Recommendation:

In order to make clear the powers delegated to committees and to officers, particularly those relating to the use of powers to intervene in schools:

- ensure that schemes of delegation are revised to take account of current legislation by the end of the corporate restructuring in 2002.

In order to make better use of the financial, pupil and other performance data held by the LEA:

- develop mechanisms and protocols to enable the data to be accessed by schools; and
- provide training for school managers in the potential benefits of accessing these data.

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION

Strategy

91. Raising the achievement of pupils with special educational needs is a priority within the authority's education development plan, indicating the LEA's commitment to this issue. The LEA has a sound strategy for meeting pupils' special educational needs, although there are weaknesses in its plans.

92. A set of principles and a five-year strategic plan for the development of SEN provision was produced promptly on the establishment of the unitary authority. This enabled a good number of essential developments to be set in train early, with the agreement of schools and other interested parties. Following a review of the plan, it was updated in September 2000 in an improved format and aligned closely to the EDP. The revised plan contains precise and ambitious criteria for success for some of the initiatives, but intended outcomes of others are less explicit. The LEA is now developing service plans to reflect the aims and objectives of its strategic plan.

93. The LEA recognised at the outset that its special schools did not provide a good match to the changing needs of the population. The provision has been reviewed and appropriate plans made for the future. Included in these is the adaptation of a primary school to create appropriate premises for pupils with severe and profound learning difficulties. There has been some significant and desirable re-organisation of SEN services, including the establishment of new teams, for example for behaviour support. Separate support teams are maintained for inclusive education and learning support. There has been insufficient evaluation of the extent to which this separation enables schools' needs to be met.

94. The borough priority of improving inclusion impacts positively on the department, and there are successful strategies for, wherever possible, supporting pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools. The LEA has in place plans to develop a specific policy for inclusion, in consultation with schools. Its policy for SEN refers to the principles of inclusion and sets out general principles by which the LEA will work but it does not present a single coherent summary of principles, provision and plans. A conference is planned to launch further initiatives on inclusive practice, which will encompass the production of a detailed policy and an action plan. The mainstream schools visited endorsed the inclusion of pupils with special needs and the LEA's aspirations in this area.

Statutory obligations

95. The LEA meets its statutory duties. It processes 88 per cent of statements, when statutory exceptions are taken into account, within the recommended timescale. The delay in receiving medical advice reduces the percentage of statements issued on time to 60 per cent. The LEA has made the medical services aware of the need for the process to be quickened, and the health authority is looking into ways of meeting the LEA's request. However, performance has improved only slightly since last year.

96. The LEA has been successful in reducing the demand for statements through initiatives designed to increase schools' capacity to meet needs without recourse to a statement of educational need. Not all statements provide a clear picture of pupils' needs, nor do they all include objectives that are specific to the pupil. The improvement of the quality of statements is an objective in the LEA's strategic plan.

97. Annual reviews of pupils' statements are carried out to time, and statements are amended when pupils' needs or capabilities change significantly. Officers attend review meetings when it is appropriate to do so, for example, at transition, or when an officer's attendance is sought by schools for specific matters. The quality of target-setting and review by schools in the annual reviews is often weak, and is not assisted by the format of the LEA's documentation. The LEA uses its database to monitor closely the progress and attainment of pupils with special educational needs, and investigates individual cases when the need arises.

School improvement

98. The LEA supports schools well to carry out their duties. Pupils' needs, for the most part, are met well by schools and the support services. The LEA has prepared a comprehensive scheme to monitor the quality of SEN provision within schools. The funding allocation to schools, while transparent, is complex, but is understood by them. Statements for the higher incidence special needs are funded at a fixed rate. Additional funding is made available for more complex needs.

99. The educational psychology service undertakes a number of activities that contribute to school development. However, current difficulties in staffing limit some initiatives. The LEA is responding to the regional and national problems in recruitment and retention of educational psychologists, and the service has made good use of educational psychology assistants to help meet schools' needs. The LEA retains an education support team (EST) that works mainly in primary schools and each school receives an allocation of time. Teachers from the EST assess pupils, but also support individuals and groups of pupils within school. The EST makes an effective contribution to the work normally carried out by the educational psychology service. Schools do not feel that their provision for pupils suffers because of the limited time that educational psychologists are able to give. However, there is insufficient clarity about the rationale underpinning the EST, its role, and monitoring and evaluation. The LEA is addressing this by responding to the recommendations made by an external consultant in order to improve the cost-effectiveness of the team.

100. Headteachers and special educational needs co-ordinators make a valuable contribution to the group that processes applications for statutory assessment. Membership of the group by representatives from schools also aids school improvement as it increases their insights into the process of allocation of special educational needs support. Co-ordinators are well supported in many respects, except that there is insufficient input from LEA staff to the networking groups.

Value for money

101. The services for special educational needs provide good value for money. Expenditure on special educational needs is below the national average, and below that of similar authorities, yet the LEA secures provision that is at least satisfactory. The SEN budget is kept securely under control. The monitoring programme for 2001/2002 includes a scheme to ensure that schools are spending funds for special educational needs appropriately.

102. The LEA has acted quickly to reduce the number of out-of-authority placements and is making more effective and efficient use of its resources by educating and supporting pupils within Warrington. The LEA's knowledge of the value for money of expensive placements in independent schools is enhanced by the employment of an independent consultant to visit the schools.

Recommendations:

In order to make best use of centrally retained resources to ensure that pupils with special educational needs are supported effectively:

- carry out the planned review of the inclusive education support team.

In order to improve further the effectiveness of the support for special educational needs co-ordinators:

- ensure that officers facilitate and support their network meetings.

SECTION 5: ACCESS

The supply of school places

103. The LEA makes sound provision in planning for school places. It has acted decisively and made good progress, although faced with some challenging issues in 1998. These included: 18.7 per cent of primary schools with over 25 per cent surplus places; demand for secondary places that was poorly matched to supply; and pockets of house building leading to pupil growth in some areas. The small policy team of officers addressing these issues provides good value for money.

104. The LEA's response has been appreciated by schools and has led to very positive relationships being established with the four local dioceses. The school organisation plan was produced earlier than most as it arose out of ongoing work. It is clearly written, helpfully explains important data and their derivation, and led to the detailed consultation documents that were the basis of a three-phase plan for the future of all schools in the borough. These consultations were, for the most part, well received and the results of stakeholders' views, tempered by a determination to put school improvement first, have been central to the planning of places.

105. Key outcomes have been the expansion of four successful secondary schools to better meet demand; primary school amalgamations; the removal or alternative use of over 500 primary places; the building of a new primary school; and an innovative move to change the character of a community secondary school to Church of England aided status. A further achievement is that all of the 2,500 pupils formerly in infant classes of over thirty are now catered for in smaller classes in expanded, successful, schools. The school organisation committee has dealt with contentious issues in a proper manner to effect the outcomes arising from the consultation processes.

106. The policy team's involvement in related areas of admissions and asset management has resulted in a well co-ordinated approach. The team is well placed to tackle outstanding issues such as further matching of primary supply and demand, especially as the rolls are predicted to fall overall whilst continuing to grow in popular housing development areas. Although pupil forecasting methodology is sound, the data are not routinely shared with schools.

Admissions

107. There are thirty-five admissions authorities in the LEA and there is considerable pressure on school places, especially in popular secondary schools. However, ninety-six per cent of parents get their first preference school. This high success rate indicates very effective performance which, combined with low costs, provides good value for money.

108. Parental information meets all requirements of the relevant code of practice, and parents' views are gathered and used in service planning. Partnerships with all admissions authorities are good, data are shared and the timing of applications is co-ordinated efficiently. Appeals, although relatively low, have been growing

but practical measures, which are already having an effect, have been introduced to cope with and reverse this trend. Relevant training for appeals panels is arranged; the most recent involving a secondary headteacher as one of the trainers. Helpfully, most appeals are resolved by Easter, and the newly agreed procedures for reducing appeals for in-year transfers are working. An admissions forum has recently been established, although the aspirations for it are somewhat nebulous, and its function unclear.

Asset management planning

109. The LEA is approaching this area with determination. Provision is sound and good progress is being made. Investment levels are increasing and the efforts of officers are, rightly, appreciated by schools and the Dioceses.

110. Initial doubts from schools about the quality of the condition data collected by a contractor were acted on quickly, and they now report greater confidence in them. This was particularly important to aided schools who felt they already had good data that had been ignored. The DfEE is also satisfied that the data and the overall asset management plan (AMP) are satisfactory, and likely to lead to property improvements. The establishment of a SLA with the environmental services department to provide monthly updates to the property database demonstrates good forward planning. The initial condition surveys met the minimum requirement made by the DfEE. Plans are now in hand to supplement them and, helpfully, agreements have been reached with all schools for them contribute their devolved capital allocation to rectify any high priority work. However, at the time of inspection, schools had not received the priority analysis of the LEA. Suitability data are particularly consistent and reliable. They were collected and assessed by an experienced former deputy headteacher. Good use has been made of security grants by involving the police in planning the best use of the resources.

111. The level of activity has been, and will continue to be, high and the LEA rightly has high aspirations. However, its capacity to deliver is limited by officer availability, especially as the detailed discussions with all schools, signalled in the Scheme for Financing Schools, are needed to maximise the potential of the AMP.

Promoting social inclusion and action to address racism

112. It is the aim of the council, clearly articulated in 'Towards the inclusive community' to promote social inclusion. The document defines social exclusion and emphasises corporate working. It sets out the council's vision of Warrington becoming a truly inclusive community in which no individual, family, group or area is so excluded as to not be able to participate in the economic, social, political and cultural life of the community. The LEA has taken a strong stance on social inclusion by setting out principles that encompass providing effective learning opportunities for all pupils and ensuring that funding structures support inclusion. They emphasise that inclusion is a feature of effective schools; and indicate that teachers should set suitable learning challenges and seek to overcome potential barriers to learning. The first priority of the EDP is to challenge and reduce social exclusion. Activities relate adequately to improving the attainment of under-

achieving groups, to challenging and reducing social exclusion. These measures reflect a proactive approach to supporting pupils in school, and thereby prevent exclusion.

113. Ensuring strong partnership work is central to the council's plans and training is planned in co-operation with other council departments. The community safety strategy group, which includes cross-departmental representation, ensures links with minority groups to provide effective liaison and support where necessary. The council also plans to establish a local racial issues group and is taking advice from the Cheshire racial equality council. The local authority is also developing its equalities strategy to provide equal access to services, diversity of service provision and equal opportunities in employment. The Cheshire, Halton and Warrington race issues group aims to work in partnership to tackle racism across those areas. The intention is to make a consistent and effective response to combating racism, to co-ordinate procedures and to share best practice. The group monitors and evaluates data in order to identify and resolve particular issues.

114. Overall, the LEA is making a sound response to the Macpherson report. As part of the council's strategy to promote social inclusion, the LEA has introduced appropriate initiatives, led by the director, to oppose racial harassment. However, this matter is only just beginning to gain the high profile in schools that it merits and the practices espoused are not sufficiently well embedded in the practice of all schools. The LEA's action plan is thorough. It sets out the actions that the department plans to take in overcoming racism and promoting cultural diversity. The LEA has defined clearly what constitutes racial incidents and harassment and has provided guidance to schools and governing bodies. School staffs, governors and officers understand their roles and how to help achieve racial harmony. Racial incidents, of which none has been classified as serious, are recorded and reported regularly by schools and are monitored by the director. Exclusions are monitored in order to identify whether particular groups of pupils are at risk, or are over-represented.

Support for improving attendance

115. Support for attendance is good. Attendance is above the national average and unauthorised absence is below.

116. The education welfare service is the main vehicle through which the LEA supports attendance. The service was reviewed early in 1999. The review's findings, and the subsequent appointment of a new principal education welfare officer, resulted in changes that led to an improved and more effective support for schools that is well differentiated. Service time is allocated to schools according to a formula based on their levels of attendance and specific needs. This ensures that those schools in greatest need attract the highest level of support, while those with good attendance receive minimal contact. The service monitors attendance in each school termly and adjusts support accordingly. For some schools though, the minimal contact visit is more than they need, and could be reduced without ill effect. Education welfare officers perform a wide range of functions to improve attendance and punctuality. They help schools to analyse patterns of attendance

and develop consistent registration practices and they work with the families of persistent low attenders. In extreme, but necessary cases, officers take action leading to prosecution. They also provide bespoke and effective training for school staffs in a range of attendance-related issues.

117. The service has issued clear and helpful guidance about legislation, admissions and attendance procedures, which schools and governors find helpful. Working partnerships between schools, the education welfare service and others involved with children and young people are good. The service makes a recognisable contribution to the support for child protection, health, and welfare. Liaison with the police is effective and there has been joint patrolling by officers from each service when this was felt to be an appropriate solution to improving attendance.

Support for improving behaviour

118. The support for improving behaviour is good. The climate in schools, according to OFSTED inspection reports, is good. Rates of exclusions are falling and the targets set to reduce them further are appropriate.

119. The behaviour support plan, although brief in some respects, is a clear document that provides practical guidance. It is supplemented by a draft document that sets out behaviour and discipline guidelines for schools. It defines clearly the responsibilities of the different partners and provides appropriate emphasis to vulnerable pupils. It has been well received by schools.

120. The behaviour support team was established in September 1999 under the inclusive education service. It is staffed mainly by primary specialists, as its main task is to support primary schools, because of the increased level of funding which secondary schools receive under Standards Fund Grant 19. Time is allocated to secondary schools according to the level of grant they receive. The planning of support and its delivery are effective. The service advises on policies to maintain discipline and on management, curriculum and pedagogy with the aim of enabling schools to manage behaviour. These strategies are well founded and result in school staffs developing their knowledge of, and expertise in, behaviour management. The service is successful in providing timely support and, in the main, reduces the need for it to respond to crises.

121. Although schools judge the LEA support to be at least satisfactory, it is not surprising, because of its focus, that it is regarded more highly by primary schools. A number of secondary schools, although valuing the quality of support, regard it as too little to enable them always to retain pupils with challenging behaviour. There are insufficient procedures in place to monitor the effectiveness of the service across the borough.

122. Provision for pupils who require support beyond that which mainstream schools are able to provide is appropriate, and the LEA takes the necessary steps to re-integrate pupils into mainstream schools whenever possible. When re-admitting pupils, the LEA takes account of parental preferences and expects all

schools to admit pupils whom it refers. However, some schools erroneously believe there are a few secondary schools that will not re-admit pupils.

Support for pupils educated otherwise than at school

123. Soon after becoming established as a LEA, officers became aware of some 80 pupils who were not on school rolls. Since that time, it has put in place mechanisms to ensure that pupils are retained in school wherever possible. The number of excluded pupils has decreased markedly, and there are currently 31 excluded pupils, of which five pupils are waiting placement planning. These figures are below the national average. When pupils are excluded, or are not able to be educated in school, they attend educational provision which is currently unregistered, but should be designated and registered as a pupil referral unit. This provision is, therefore, unsatisfactory. It is for Key Stage 4 pupils who are educated out of school. Accommodation at the local college is utilised by the LEA to provide bespoke educational provision for Year 10 and Year 11 pupils, a number of who attend the college for part of their programme. The majority of pupils receive between ten and twenty hours per week and the LEA aims to increase this to 25 hours over the next year.

124. A number of effective systems are in place to support inclusion. Amongst them are the reductions in the time spent out of school by pupils who have been permanently excluded before being reintegrated to another school, and improved access to educational opportunities for young mothers. In addition, there is effective monitoring of, and support for, children educated other than at school, children in public care and those for whom English is an additional language.

125. Hospital tuition is appropriately provided for hospitalised pupils, those whose illness prevents them attending school, and those in transition from hospital to school.

Support for children in public care

126. The LEA makes good provision for children in public care. Corporate working with the social services department is very effective and has resulted in the development of shared protocols and joint training. The health authorities work closely with the local authority in ensuring that the needs of children in care are met. The council has been highly successful in ensuring that children, wherever possible, are placed with foster carers and it only uses residential placement when necessary.

127. The children's service plan is in line with the Quality Protects management action plan and is based on effective consultation and corporate understanding of the council's responsibilities. There are appropriate links between these plans and the EDP, the behaviour support plan, the early years development and child care partnership development plan and the youth justice plan. Strong messages are given the council that planning for children's services, and, particularly those for children in public care and vulnerable groups, are responsibilities for the council as a whole. This is reinforced by the newly constituted children and young

persons panel, which acts as a sub-group of the council's policy and resources committee.

128. The LEA monitors very closely the progress made by children in public care. Schools know the children in care on their rolls and are conversant with the duties that they are required to carry out. Each school has a designated teacher for children in public care, for whom the LEA provides training and monitors attendance in order to remind schools when staff need to undertake training. Personal education plans for the children have been introduced recently as part of the council's phased programme of training and implementation. The strong links that exist between the work of the different aspects of the education service ensure that support for children in public care is kept under review and receives a high profile.

129. The targets set for children in public care are low; a matter that the LEA acknowledges and is addressing, although the support that it is providing has not yet had time to take effect.

130. The major challenge to the council is in monitoring and ensuring appropriate support for the growing number of children in public care from outside the borough who are placed in private care homes located within it. A significant number of these children have additional needs to which the local authority is keen to respond appropriately, but often finds itself in the position of not having ready access to case files, or discovering that the files are not complete. The greatest concern is about meeting the needs of those pupils who arrive in the borough at crucial stages of the code of practice, or are in receipt of a statement. While the local authority is vigilant in this aspect of its work, and has been able to monitor and meet the needs of children in public care in private care homes, numbers are rising. This matter will continue to challenge the council's resources.

Support for the health, safety, welfare and protection of pupils

131. LEA procedures for health, safety, welfare and child protection are good.

132. The guidance on child protection, though adequate, has been revised in line with the recent government guidance, 'Working Together'. The revision was led by the social services department, with representation from the education and personnel departments and has resulted in the handbook, 'Warrington Area Child Protection Procedures'. This describes clearly the multi-disciplinary procedures for agencies and professions who may have concerns about a child's safety and welfare; lists individual agency procedures; and gives practical guidance and information on a range of child protection issues. It is aimed at enhancing the basic knowledge of professionals. It sets out clearly all the relevant information and makes appropriate references to race, ethnicity and culture. It makes clear the school's responsibility to establish a system for dealing with child protection.

133. Schools are satisfied with the guidance they receive and are clear about the procedures that they need to follow when they have concerns about pupils. Each school has a named person who has responsibility for child protection. Procedures work well. There are good working relationships between officers

within the education department, and with other relevant departments and agencies, and there is a strong commitment to ensure that vulnerable children are protected and are kept under review. The education welfare service plays an important role in supporting and monitoring individual pupils.

134. The LEA carries out the necessary health and safety functions and advises schools accordingly. Through its health and safety unit, and in consultation with trade unions, it carries out a three year rolling programme of site inspections which lead to priorities being identified. The LEA has provided guidance on child employment, and the council carries out audit checks on health and safety at work. A useful seminar for headteachers and governors was aimed at helping them to assess the risks to security and personal safety. Each school is required to nominate a member of staff as a health and safety officer.

Support for minority ethnic pupils including Travellers

135. The number of minority ethnic pupils, including Travellers, at 1.8 per cent of the school population, is well below the national figure. The performance of minority ethnic pupils is at least in line with that of pupils in Warrington and is, therefore, above the national average. Whilst the LEA acknowledges the attainment of these pupils, it is not complacent in its approach to supporting them.

136. The LEA has detailed data on the ethnic composition of schools and of each school's needs for English language support. The few schools with significant proportions of minority ethnic pupils receive effective support. These schools, and the LEA, monitor pupils' progress carefully and are well informed about the performance of individual pupils. The LEA has established a small English language support service to meet these pupils' needs and is fully aware of the problems which isolated minority heritage pupils may face in school. It is conscious that the lack of awareness in the wider community of cultural diversity may be a very isolating experience for some pupils. The service is effective in supporting children for whom English is not their first language using teachers and bilingual assistants. The work to promote cultural diversity across the borough is beginning to be effective and the plans for its development are promising. Additionally, the service provides support for schools in meeting the needs of refugee and asylum-seeking children.

137. Support for Traveller children is appropriately provided through a consortium of Cheshire, Stockport, Halton and Warrington LEAs and a key worker from the service works with Traveller pupils, their families, and the two primary schools that the pupils attend. The LEA monitors the education of five Traveller pupils who are being educated at home.

Support for gifted and talented pupils

138. Supporting gifted and talented pupils is a priority in the EDP and there are plans to help schools to identify and support such children, but work has been too limited to be effective. Little attempt has been made to define 'gifted and talented' with sufficient clarity so that schools are able to identify those pupils who could benefit from support.

139. A summer school was held during 2000, which aimed to provide challenging and rewarding activities for the top five per cent of pupils in Years 6 and 7 in 12 high schools. Sixty-five children enrolled and enjoyed extended literacy, numeracy, ICT, and physical education experiences that were combined with an educational visit to Jodrell Bank. The summer school experience was documented, but there is insufficient evaluation to inform the future development and success of such summer schools.

140. The LEA has commissioned research into how it can plan and develop strategies to support gifted and talented pupils and a newly appointed adviser has taken on responsibility for this area of work.

Recommendations

In order for schools to gain greater benefit from LEA pupil number predictions and use them for medium term budget planning:

- data should be shared routinely with schools.

In order to ensure maximum value is gained from the asset management plan (AMP):

- implement a carefully costed plan of the time needed to deliver school based asset management discussions in addition to current work.

In order to comply with the requirements of Section 19 of the Education Act 1996:

- take immediate action to register the provision for pupils educated other than at school as a pupil referral unit of the LEA.

In order to improve provision made for gifted and talented pupils:

- set out clearly the strategy for identifying and responding to the needs of gifted and talented pupils.

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to increase the impact of Best Value in schools:

- ensure that more detailed information is provided to improve the understanding of BV principles and practice in schools and in the department; and
- provide guidance to schools on how BV can be used to aid school improvement.

In order to clarify further the use of LEA resources for monitoring, challenge and support in the 2002 EDP:

- separately identify the funding which the LEA retains in order to carry out its functions under the School Standards and Funding Act, and that which is devolved to schools for the purpose of purchasing curriculum support; and
- develop the existing internal monitoring systems so that in future the purpose and deployment of advisers' time is made more transparent to schools.

In order to improve the ICT infrastructure and extend the application of ICT in schools:

- ensure that the implementation and communication of the LEA strategy for curriculum development is accorded a high priority;
- develop and implement a strategy for the ICT infrastructure that includes council objectives and school priorities; and
- involve schools, particularly secondary schools, in targeting LEA ICT support and advice at their needs.

In order to promote the more efficient use of advisers' time:

- ensure that, in the next EDP, sufficient differentiation is planned into the level of support provided by advisers to governing bodies to take into account the strengths of some and the needs of others.

In order to make clear the powers delegated to committees and to officers, particularly those relating to the powers to intervene in schools:

- ensure that schemes of delegation are revised to take account of current legislation by the end of the corporate restructuring in 2002.

In order to make better use of the financial, pupil and other performance data held by the LEA:

- develop mechanisms and protocols to enable the data to be accessed by schools; and

- provide training for school managers in the potential benefits of accessing these data.

In order to make best use of centrally retained resources and ensure that pupils with special educational needs are supported effectively:

- carry out the planned review of the education support team.

In order to improve further the effectiveness of the support for special educational needs co-ordinators:

- ensure that officers facilitate and support their network meetings.

In order for schools to gain greater benefit from LEA pupil number predictions and use them for medium term budget planning:

- data should be shared routinely with schools.

In order to ensure maximum value is gained from the AMP:

- implement a carefully costed plan of the time needed to deliver school based asset management discussions in addition to current work.

In order to comply with the requirements of Section 19 of the Education Act 1996:

- take immediate action to register the provision for pupils educated other than at school as a pupil referral unit of the LEA.

In order to improve provision made for gifted and talented pupils:

- set out clearly the strategy for identifying and responding to the needs of gifted and talented pupils.

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