



**OFFICE FOR STANDARDS
IN EDUCATION**

**INSPECTION OF
WIRRAL
LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

February 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* which focuses on the effectiveness of local education authority (LEA) work to support school improvement. The inspection also took account of the Local Government Act 1999, in so far as it relates to work undertaken by the LEA on Best Value
2. The inspection was partly based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA, on school inspection information and audit reports, on documentation and discussions with LEA members, staff in the education department and in other Council departments, and representatives of the LEA's partners. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on aspects of the LEA's work was circulated to all schools. The response rate was 84 per cent.
3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to 11 primary, five secondary and three special schools. 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 which is provided by the LEA contributes, where appropriate, to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in the school, and provides value for money. Evidence from other HMI visits to schools in the LEA was also considered.

COMMENTARY

4. The Wirral peninsula, situated between the Mersey and Dee estuaries, is the eighth largest metropolitan authority in England with a stable population of 330,000. It is an authority of contrasts: the more densely populated Merseyside seaboard, centred on Birkenhead, has suffered many years of industrial decline with the downturn in shipbuilding and other port industries. Economic growth remains slow. South and west Wirral, bordering Liverpool Bay and the Dee estuary, is less densely populated and generally affluent.

5. Wirral retains a selective grammar school system. Many of its pupils and schools perform very well. At all key stages, and in all core subjects, Wirral's pupils attain above, and are progressing faster than, similar authorities and national averages. Half of the pupils in Wirral schools gain five A*-C grade GCSEs. School inspection reports indicate that Wirral has more good and very good schools than other authorities. There are no schools in special measures. This is a very positive picture.

6. The LEA itself claims to be 'modern but not fashionable.' Its aspiration to modernity is developing, but unfulfilled. The Council has no corporate plan or modernised structure, although both will be in place by the end of 2001. The LEA's relationship with its schools is founded upon established practice that is well-regarded by schools but which has not moved forward sufficiently to promote the autonomy of schools in line with the LEA - School Code of Practice. It has not taken the tough decisions necessary to implement Government policy on increasing the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs. Nevertheless, the quality of its services to schools is always responsive, often good and sometimes, as in support for literacy and numeracy, excellent. The LEA has built a strong foundation of partnership with its schools and, on balance, has more strengths than weaknesses.

7. The following functions, which support school improvement, are performed well or better:

- support to schools for the use of performance data;
- support for literacy;
- support for numeracy;
- support to schools causing concern;
- support to school management and governors;
- management support services, especially personnel and financial services;
- asset management planning.

8. The LEA is weak in terms of its:

- corporate strategy;
- inclusion strategy for pupils with special educational needs;
- strategy for monitoring and supporting schools in line with the principles of the LEA-Schools Code of Practice;
- support for information communication technology (ICT) in the curriculum; and
- support for attendance and access to education for some vulnerable pupils.

9. The leadership of the LEA, both corporate and departmental, is sound and secure, and has the potential to move the LEA further forward in its relationship with schools in line with Government policy: the schools themselves have a solid basis of leadership and performance from which to increase their autonomy. To achieve this more modern relationship, the LEA should have the confidence to reduce its level of involvement in good schools and confront difficult and unpopular issues. The LEA has the capacity; it now requires the strategy and the will to do so.

SECTION ONE: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

10. The Wirral peninsula, situated between the Mersey and Dee estuaries, is a mixture of urban, rural and coastal areas with a balanced industrial, agricultural and residential landscape. It is the eighth largest metropolitan authority with a population of 330,000. Lack of economic growth, currently 1.2 per cent compared to 3 per cent nationally, is a significant problem which drives the corporate priority of economic regeneration. Out of 150 LEAs in England, Wirral is the 44th most deprived.

11. The maintained school population in January 2000 was 55,631, of which 28,453 were primary pupils, 23,827 secondary, 2,312 nursery and 1,039 special school pupils. The minority ethnic population is very small (1.4 per cent compared to 8.6 per cent for statistical neighbours and 11.7 per cent nationally); 28 per cent of pupils are entitled to free school meals, higher than the average nationally and for similar LEAs. The proportions of pupils with statements of special educational needs and in special schools are above average and rising.

12. Wirral has 69 community primary, junior and infant schools, with an additional 27 which are voluntary aided and five which are voluntary controlled. In the secondary sector, there are 16 community schools, five voluntary aided and two foundation schools: six of these are selective grammar schools. In addition, there are 11 special schools, three nursery schools, two further education colleges and one pupil referral unit.

Performance of schools

13. Attainment on entry to primary schools is below that of similar LEAs and the national average.

14. The quality of, and standards in, schools in Wirral LEA as judged by OFSTED school inspection reports, compare very favourably with similar LEAs and the national average: significantly more are deemed very good or good, and fewer require improvement.

15. At the end of Key Stage 2 pupils perform better than the national average and statistical neighbours. Improvements have been made in all Key Stage 2 core subjects between 1995-2000 and are ahead of target.

16. The proportion of pupils gaining five A*-C at GCSE was 49.6 per cent in 2000, comparing favourably with similar LEAs and the national average. Improvement between 1994-2000 has increased faster than similar LEAs and the national average.

17. Unauthorised absence rates are similar to statistical neighbours and the national average. Rates of permanent exclusions from secondary schools are low compared to both statistical neighbours and the national average.

Funding

18. Wirral LEA has funded the education service at slightly under its Standard Spending Assessment (SSA), but within three percentage points, for the last five years. This contrasts with funding above SSA for other Council services in 2000/01. School and pre-school provision is funded near to or above SSA but services such as youth, community and adult education are funded at less than 50 per cent of SSA.

19. Capital expenditure per pupil is similar to the national average but it has increased steeply since 1995/96 with recent increases being due to capital grants, especially New Deal for Schools. These also include Capital Challenge funding for improvements to two secondary schools in 1997/98 to 2000/01. The LEA has a Private Finance Initiative project worth £55 million covering the replacement, refurbishment and maintenance of nine schools for which the preferred bidder was announced in September 2000. Standards Funding, including Excellence in Cities funding, more than doubled to £12.4m in 2000/01, necessitating additional unplanned matched funding of £1.4m by the LEA.

20. The LEA exceeded the DfEE targets for delegation in 2000/01 but at 82.8 per cent it delegated slightly less than the average for metropolitan authorities and nationally; this was also the pattern in 1999/2000. On a per pupil basis, Wirral primary and secondary school budgets are similar to those in metropolitan authorities and nationally. However, special schools' delegated budgets are less than the average for metropolitan authorities and nationally.

21. Wirral LEA's expenditure on centrally provided services in 2000/2001, is generally similar to the national average. Central expenditure on special educational needs (SEN) is slightly lower than nationally, although substantially above 1999/2000 spending, while expenditure on access and on non-devolved grants is higher than the national average.

22. In response to schools' wishes, the Local Management of Schools (LMS) funding formula has changed little during the 1990s but the LEA now rightly proposes in 2001/02 to link secondary SEN funding to Key Stage 2 results, rather than to free school meals. The special school funding formula has never been sufficiently linked to the support needs of pupils with different levels of SEN which has led to long term under-funding of some special schools.

23. In line with the relatively high levels of SEN identified in Wirral schools, the LEA spends a slightly higher proportion of its local schools budget (LSB) on SEN than the national average and more than similar LEAs. Relatively high-spending areas are the special schools' budget, funding for pupils without statements in mainstream schools, additional educational needs funding of mainstream schools and SEN transport.

Council structure

24. Wirral Council currently has a Labour majority of two. It operates through a traditional structure of eleven main committees. The Education Committee is supported by the Education General Panel and the Youth Service Advisory

Committee. A cross-service Children's Panel supports the Policy & Resources Committee. School inspection reports and subsequent action plans are referred to the Education General Panel and areas of common interest between the Education and Social Services Committees are referred to the Children's Panel.

Education Development Plan (EDP)

25. The EDP has eight priorities aimed at raising quality and standards in schools:

- 1 Self evaluation and review, including school leadership and management;
- 2 Under-performing schools;
- 3 Literacy and numeracy;
- 4 ICT;
- 5 All subjects of the curriculum and spiritual, creative, cultural and independent learning;
- 6 Provision for specific groups of pupils, including those with SEN;
- 7 Early Years; and
- 8 Inclusion.

26. These are nearly all well focused and closely linked to local and national priorities. Priority 5, however, is too wide. It includes support for the full range of national curriculum subjects and religious education, regardless of whether they are key priorities or areas identified as weak in the audit. It also enables almost all aspects of advisory and inspection curriculum work to be linked to the plan. Analysis of time spent by inspectors, advisers and advisory teachers on the different priorities, shows disproportionate attention to Priority 5. This is reflected, for example, in the INSET programme, where nearly half of all courses in 1999-2000 were allied to the priority.

27. The actions set out are likely to lead to the stated purpose, although this is not true of all priorities. In priorities, 6,7 and 8, for example, there is a lack of coherence between intention, target group and success criteria. There are clear links with corporate key priorities, and objectives are made explicit. Priorities and related activities are mostly set out clearly. Responsibilities, accountabilities and timing are clear, as are the sources of funding for each activity.

28. In determining its priorities, the LEA made effective use of National Curriculum assessments, examination data and a local audit for literacy, numeracy and ICT. It also made satisfactory use of available national data from inspections as well as findings and data from its local monitoring. Targets represent a good level of challenge from the 1998 base, and good progress towards them has been made between 1998 and 2000 in Key Stage 2 literacy and numeracy.

29. Consultation and communication about the EDP were broadly effective. There was a good match between the EDP and the School Development Plan (SDP) in about half of the schools visited and all of the headteachers approved of the priorities. During consultation, Priority 5 was supported by primary headteachers who wanted continued support in foundation subjects, but, in concurring with this, the

LEA missed an opportunity to clarify priorities with schools. This weakened the plan overall.

30. The implementation of the plan is mostly on course. However, success criteria are generally lacking in precision and too related to provision. In Priority 1, for example, it is not clear how the LEA will monitor the impact of its training and development. Link inspectors are to be 'fully involved in working with schools and governors on self-evaluation matters'. They will moderate schools' judgements, but it is not clear how they will do this. Otherwise, the monitoring and evaluation of the EDP are broadly satisfactory. The annual report for 1999-2000 indicates in detail what provision has been made against each activity and lists improvements in outcomes. Opportunities are lost in some areas to provide more objective measures for activities and in others to link outcomes to activities.

Allocation of resources to priorities and Best Value

31. Links between budget planning and service planning are weak, although they are being strengthened by recently introduced planning processes. The Council is in the early stages of developing a corporate approach and introducing a system of strategic planning and performance management. Within a context of tight budgetary constraints, financial controls are generally good. Until this year, budget planning was based on a traditional, incremental process, led by the Director of Finance, and focusing on identifying savings. However, the introduction of medium term budget planning linked to service development plans in 2000-01 is more strategic and transparent. The LEA has recognised the need to involve schools earlier in the budget process and has now made appropriate arrangements to consult headteachers and governors during the autumn term.

32. The Council published its Best Value Performance Plan in accordance with statutory requirements. It is a clear and accessible document. The plan was approved by the district auditor without qualification, but it was recommended that performance information systems should be strengthened across the Council. The Council has published an excellent and detailed Best Value policy and guidance handbook which includes a useful framework for Best Value Reviews (BVRs). Although some of the pilot BVRs were inadequately resourced and were insufficiently challenging, those undertaken in education have had an impact through the sharpening of service targets and by increasing awareness of alternative service providers. Members have now recognised the importance of the Best Value framework and are keen to be involved in the planning of reviews.

SECTION 2 SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Monitoring, challenge, support and intervention

33. There is a relatively large number of senior and general inspectors, although they cover a variety of necessary senior management roles, not just those associated with the curriculum. Some have responsibilities more like the traditional officer role, but all undertake an element of inspection, for example as a link inspector, all contribute to the school improvement programme and all carry the job title of 'general inspector' or 'senior inspector'. This blurring of the distinction between officers and inspectors is helpful in presenting and implementing a unified approach to LEA support but can be confusing to schools in their understanding of what they pay for, and what the LEA holds back centrally, from school budgets.

34. The six senior inspectors each manage a group of general inspectors (GIs) in addition to having strategic, second-tier, management roles. Each GI has a link role with a group of schools. Six GIs are responsible for phase or cross-phase issues, nine lead on subjects or aspects and seven have non-curricular responsibilities. National strategies in literacy, numeracy and ICT are each supported by a specialist adviser.

35. There are 18 seconded advisory teachers, line managed by GIs, covering a wide range of curriculum areas and including members of the literacy and numeracy support teams. In addition, two headteachers are currently seconded to support specific initiatives. All schools opt to buy back advisory and inspection support and this, together with specific grants and initiatives, funds the advisory teachers as well as the in-service training programme and the professional development centre.

36. This amounts to approximately one member of the service for every three schools, even discounting those inspectors who have other responsibilities beyond the curriculum. The centrally funded element of this field force results in a range of support which is too wide to be applying the Code of Practice principle of deploying resources in inverse proportion to the success of schools, bearing in mind the large number of good schools on the Wirral, and the correspondingly small number of schools causing concern. Inspectors also undertake a small number of OFSTED inspections outside the LEA each year, both for the Wirral and for other contractors, and the capacity of the service is such that officers are looking to diversify by increased trading outside the LEA.

37. The LEA thus adopts an approach to monitoring, support and intervention that is inconsistent with the Code of Practice for LEA-School Relations. For example, all schools are seen as having potential weaknesses, no matter what their overall effectiveness. Inspectors undertake a detailed paper-based analysis of pupil performance across subjects in each secondary school. While this lends some rationale to the deployment of general inspectors and advisory teachers, the resulting levels of support erode the notion of school autonomy in the Code of Practice. The role of GIs also includes, often as the largest single element, attendance at all full governing body meetings as LEA representatives. Such practices do not encourage schools to monitor their own performance, work out what needs to be done to raise standards, and act effectively to do it.

38. All schools receive a minimum number of monitoring visits by their link GI. These include visits for target-setting, monitoring the progress of national initiatives, - checking the progress of post-inspection action plans and agreeing a summary of performance data analysis. Although this amounts to only a few hours for the most successful schools, it could be reduced further. The written analysis of performance data, for example, could and should be done by the vast majority of headteachers for themselves. The checking of the progress of action plans need not entail a visit to every school. Clear written feedback is provided for headteachers, but not systematically for chairs of governors, thus reducing their capacity to challenge the school's performance.

39. The overall pattern of contact with schools does not sufficiently demonstrate the deployment of resources in inverse proportion to success, although the weakest schools clearly receive the most attention, and support for literacy and numeracy has been well targeted. There is a widespread perception amongst headteachers that support is always available on demand. Few headteachers in the schools visited were fully aware of the cost to the school of the buy-back arrangement, or the consequences of non-subscription. More significantly, most were unaware of what the single, all embracing subscription paid for and what elements of support were funded centrally. Thus, although headteachers fiercely defend their autonomy from the LEA and generally value highly the support they get, they have very little critical awareness of value for money regarding curriculum support.

40. Most of the support provided is, in practice, of good or very good quality. In particular, the support teams for literacy and numeracy have had a significant impact on improving the quality of teaching and pupils' attainment. There were examples in other subjects, however, where the impact of advisory teacher support was less clear and where this had not extended to raising pupils' attainment in individual schools. Headteachers value their link inspector, although this varies depending on the skills and expertise of the inspector concerned. Inspectors' relationships with schools have changed in recent years, especially through a conscious rise in the level of challenge.

41. Where schools are causing concern, LEA intervention is sustained, well focused and of good quality. The LEA has made a major impact on the improvement of the few schools placed in special measures or declared as having serious weaknesses. Schools otherwise causing the LEA concern also benefit from the LEA's extensive support mechanisms.

42. The newly published self-evaluation framework, 'Taking Our School Forward', is a helpful step towards increased school autonomy, although the document does not make the centrality of self-review sufficiently explicit. It is not clear, for example, that headteachers in all but the weakest schools, rather than the school's link inspector, should now be expected to undertake the analysis of subject outcomes and identify support needs for themselves.

Collection and analysis of data

43. The LEA's provision of data for schools and guidance on using it has helped schools to focus on areas where improvements can be made and to raise standards. Ambitious targets have been set that, measured against the current trend of steady improvement, are attainable. Performance data provided by the authority includes school-specific, LEA and national information so schools can compare their performance. Scatter graphs link school performance in the LEA with free school meals. The LEA has identified that it lacks data on attendance, pupil mobility and ethnicity, that would further help target provision.

44. Primary schools' ability to raise standards has been assisted by the early collection and use of good quality data. The Wirral Starting Points baseline assessment system has benefited curriculum planning and teaching for the youngest pupils. There is an established assessment system in place in primary schools that is linked to National Curriculum results and appropriate standardised tests. A newly introduced spreadsheet enables schools to analyse individual pupil performance, make predictions about future attainment and target areas for improvements in teaching. The helpful guidance on the use of data includes methods of analysing data to identify inconsistencies and trends that can be investigated further.

45. Secondary schools make good use of data to plan the curriculum, organise pupil groups and set targets for improvement. They receive Key Stage 2 National Curriculum results in August in electronic form along with previously collected results of teacher assessment in the summer term. Despite these efficient arrangements, transfer data is not comprehensive at the time of the new intake owing to the high number of appeals for places in secondary schools, and this hinders planning. A range of standardised tests is used to measure attainment and the results are taken into account when target-setting for individuals and cohorts of pupils. Some schools visited were involved in piloting approaches to measure pupils' progress against their attainment on entry. These schools had a sophisticated understanding of the use of data to help raise standards.

46. These positive achievements stem from the high priority placed on auditing and monitoring school performance in the Education Development Plan. Training for senior managers, governors, heads of department in secondary schools and literacy and numeracy coordinators prepares each for their role in using data to raise standards. A phased plan of action and detailed briefings for inspectors and advisers has ensured consistency in the training provided. Most training has been effective but a few senior managers in schools have difficulties with interpreting and handling data and using IT systems.

47. Senior managers in schools, governors and link advisers approach target setting in an informed manner owing to their good understanding of the available data. Given the low level of attainment on entry in many schools, targets set are challenging. Schools have responded very positively and are well on the way to meeting and sometimes exceeding them.

48. Leadership and management of collection and analysis of data are very effective. The School Improvement Data Group comprising inspectors, senior

teachers and governors oversees development. The LEA consults well about support for data collection and use. Care is taken not to over-burden schools with requests for data.

Support for literacy

49. The LEA has a longstanding commitment to raising standards in literacy and has levels of attainment in primary schools that are above national averages and those of statistical neighbours. This priority is reflected in the importance given to literacy in the EDP. Given the socio-economic background and attainment of pupils on entry to school, the target of 83 per cent of pupils reaching level 4 at the end of Key Stage 2 by 2002 is challenging. However, the steady trend of improvement indicates that the target is achievable.

50. Support for literacy is excellent. The LEA's literacy strategy is clearly focused, well targeted and having a significant impact on raising standards. An audit of local needs and national priorities helped identify areas for development in the literacy action plan. Schools receiving intensive literacy support have benefited and standards are rising. The plan builds on established initiatives in the early years such as the Wirral baseline assessment procedure, reading recovery approaches and a project targeted at the development of key learning skills. The focus on speaking, listening and drama has helped to support pupils' understanding of what they read and write. Due attention has been given to the critical point of transfer between primary and secondary schools where a range of strategies has been tried with some success: booster classes for Year 6, summer schools and introductions to the National Literacy Strategy for key staff in secondary schools.

51. The very effective leadership and management provided by the LEA are crucial to the success of the literacy plan. The team is staffed generously by a literacy adviser and consultant and three seconded advisory teachers. Link inspectors monitor teaching and standards in schools effectively. Other services are appropriately linked: for instance, the special education support service, early years and the English as an additional language teams. The literacy team is well deployed to help schools in most need where, through training and intensive support, it has increased teachers' confidence and helped raise standards.

52. The high quality support and training provided by the LEA has prepared head teachers, governors, literacy coordinators and heads of English departments to carry out their roles effectively. Training sessions have helped staff in schools to understand the National Literacy Strategy and implement it, monitor pupils' progress and improve the teaching of reading and writing. Schools receiving intensive support have benefited from a focus on the specific concerns of the class teacher and issues pertinent to the school. Classroom assistants have benefited from training. Networks of literacy coordinators and heads of English, convened by an advisory teacher, have gained expertise from sharing good practice and tackling together common problems.

53. High quality support for literacy was indicated by the school survey and found in visits to schools. In the survey, both primary and secondary schools rated support significantly above average, with the majority rating it as good or very good.

Support was judged to be mostly good in the primary schools visited and at least satisfactory in all of the secondary schools.

Support for numeracy

54. Support for numeracy is a clear strength of the LEA. Support has been well targeted and has motivated teachers and pupils alike. Schools receiving intensive support have, on average, improved their pupils' attainment at a faster rate than other schools in the LEA.

55. The LEA's target for pupils attaining Level 4 or above at the end of Key Stage 2 by 2002 is 78 per cent. This represents a reasonable challenge when compared to the 1998 base figure of 61 per cent. The LEA is well on course to reach its target. This figure has risen steadily in recent years, at first in line with similar LEAs and national averages and, at 74 per cent in 2000, rising faster than the national average.

56. An excellent start has been made to the LEA's implementation of the National Numeracy Strategy. Support work in three primary schools began one year prior to the official launch of the strategy and the impact on attainment in these, and the other 13 schools receiving intensive support during the first year of the strategy, has been impressive. In an appropriate development of the strategy, the number of schools receiving intensive support has risen to 45 this year, reflecting a desire to reach more schools, though at a reduced level of intensity.

57. A very able numeracy/mathematics team provides support for schools. Flair and enthusiasm has characterised their work with teachers in classrooms and demonstrating lessons. Good use is made of the 14 leading mathematics teachers in the LEA, who receive visits from other teachers to see them teach mathematics lessons. Subsequent discussions lead to improvements in teaching practices in visiting teachers' schools.

58. Work in Key Stage 3 has also started to have some impact and teachers value the materials and training for numeracy very highly. One secondary school visited had run a summer numeracy school with effective help from the LEA team, not only in the planning and management, but also in the teaching. Heads of department, like coordinators in primary schools, are well supported through termly meetings. In-service training in numeracy has been wide-ranging and is highly rated by teachers.

59. Link inspectors have undertaken monitoring, which provided a helpful overview of teaching and of how well pupils were learning mental arithmetic strategies. Schools have also been expected to undertake their own monitoring, using the new Framework for School Self-Review. Headteachers were well prepared for this through training to monitor pupils' mental arithmetic strategies as part of their general course in school self-review.

60. The school survey and visits to schools confirmed this very positive picture. In the survey, both primary and secondary schools rated support significantly above average, with 96 per cent of primary schools and 61 per cent of secondary schools

rating it as good or very good. Support was judged to be good in all of the primary schools visited and at least satisfactory in all of the secondary schools.

Support for ICT

61. Support for ICT in the curriculum is improving following readjustments to service provision, but remains a weakness. The main reasons for this are that too little support is focused on classrooms and that technical support has not been coherent. Pupils' attainment at Key Stage 3, based on teacher assessment, is above national average. GCSE results are in line with the national average.

62. The LEA's curriculum ICT strategy is broadly sound, but the Council has only recently started to develop a corporate strategy to which this can relate. The lateness of this is problematic, given that decisions have already been taken as part of the National Grid for Learning (NGfL) with regard to the local infrastructure. Spending under the NGfL has been well aligned to the LEA's ICT development plan and schools' expenditure is carefully monitored. The LEA has been successful in procuring extensive additional European funding for ICT, which has considerably extended the resources available to secondary schools.

63. Improvement in ICT provision and standards is a priority in the EDP. The LEA's ICT Development Plan concentrates appropriately on the Wirral Learning Grid (WLG), the local Internet content, and incorporates sound planning for the NGfL programme. The WLG web-site provides a range of curriculum materials and planning documents in a well organised and presented structure. Teachers are making increasing use of these resources, although the use of the Internet by pupils is still limited. The LEA has provided sound guidance for schools to help them avoid potential misuse of the Internet.

64. There is generally insufficient support for the use of ICT within classrooms. The curriculum team delivers important aspects of technical support, but there is too little attention to developing teaching and learning. Support in schools causing concern has been ineffective because, unlike the support for literacy and numeracy, it has not been focused on teaching in classrooms. There is a range of in-service training courses for teachers, but these rarely go beyond the mechanics of using software. There is very little, additional training for teachers on the use of ICT with pupils, to complement the growing take-up of New Opportunities Fund training.

65. Technical problems, including unreliable access to the Internet and constraints on network management in secondary schools, have hindered progress. Schools find the array of teams providing technical support for ICT confusing.

66. There is little overview of ICT in schools and little evaluation of school practice and LEA support. Schools' ICT development plans were not all fully checked by the LEA in order to release NGfL funding, as required, and there was insufficient dialogue with senior staff in schools about them.

67. School visits confirmed the critical picture which emerged from the school survey, with support judged to be unsatisfactory in half of the schools visited. In spite of these shortcomings, there are signs of improvement. The LEA is sharpening

its focus on pupils' attainment in ICT. For example, it has developed its own Certificate of ICT Capability for primary schools, matched to National Curriculum levels and intended, in part, to facilitate the collation of primary attainment data.

Support for schools causing concern

68. The LEA has been successful in keeping the numbers of schools requiring special measures or with serious weaknesses very low. Since 1993, only two schools have been placed in special measures, and only one of those in the past five years. This school made rapid improvements and came out of special measures in 17 months. Only five schools have been found by OFSTED to have serious weaknesses and these too have received effective support. The LEA's procedures and criteria for intervention are clear and appropriate, involving the headteacher and governing body. The LEA has its own category of 'under review' and also identifies those schools in need of intensive support in literacy and numeracy.

69. The LEA support for the school that was placed in special measures in 1999 was very effective. In particular, support for literacy and numeracy had a significant and rapid impact on improving pupils' attainment. The LEA transferred a headteacher from another school who proved well able to take the school forward very quickly. Support was provided for her in preparing an action plan. Useful support was also provided in the appointment of three new governors, financial expertise, improvements to the building and the speeding up of new staff appointments. The local authority's holistic approach to improving the locality, including housing, helped the school to thrive and the attitudes of the community started to change as local people become aware of Council's commitment to their needs.

70. The LEA accurately identifies schools causing concern based on its own knowledge of schools, National Curriculum and examination data and OFSTED inspection findings. Concerns may also arise from other factors such as a pattern of targets not being met and comments from parents or governors. Concern triggers additional support and closer monitoring. There are clear structures, enabling all inspectors, advisers, advisory teachers and other services to contribute any concerns about individual schools to the LEA's collective intelligence.

71. Priority 2 in the EDP states the intention to establish school improvement files for the lowest performing ten per cent of schools in all phases. This intention has been met. Individual action plans have been drawn up, support has been put in place and senior officers keep these schools under continual review while the concern lasts. A weakness revealed by school visits is that there is no clear strategy for the reduction and removal of additional support. Headteachers are not always aware when they move from one category of concern to another and the level of intervention and support does not always change accordingly.

72. Support to schools causing concern was rated highly, and significantly above average, by headteachers in the school survey. In those schools visited intensive programmes of support had been implemented and the balance between challenge and support handled sensitively and effectively. Headteachers generally received clear feedback, both orally and in writing, although this was not systematically

conveyed to governors. In all of the primary schools visited in this category, pupils' attainment in the core subjects had improved where this was a weakness. Support to improve standards in ICT was not effective. In secondary schools, the impact of support was less clear cut, though generally positive for English. In other areas, continued staffing problems in schools had hampered improvement.

Support and training for governors

73. Support for governors is very well managed, highly effective and has a positive impact on the management of schools. All primary and secondary schools buy into the service. A high level of satisfaction with the service provided was found during inspection, the LEA triennial review and the OFSTED school survey.

74. The LEA provides a very effective service to governors through useful training programmes, an informative newsletter, a rapidly developing governors' website and a responsive telephone help-line. Training by link inspectors for all governing bodies on use of data was timely and has enabled governors to take an active part in monitoring standards and target-setting. They all agreed, and physically signed-up to, pupil performance targets with the LEA. Governing bodies and the LEA have assiduously monitored pupil performance against these agreed targets. Induction and performance management training is particularly well received and take-up is good.

75. LEA consultation with governors is good. The independent Wirral governors forum brings together governors from across the authority and represents their views to the LEA. The director briefs the chairs of governing bodies termly and listens and responds to governors' views. Governors are represented on LEA working parties. They feel involved in a dialogue with the LEA and perceive that their contribution is valued.

76. Governing bodies are well served by personnel services, particularly for the recruitment of head teachers and in situations involving redundancy and competency.

77. The governors interviewed were focused clearly on school improvement. They were involved in discussions about target setting and in support for the leadership and management in the school. Governors in schools causing concern were very committed to the challenge of improving the quality of education and management and were able to do so. However, in many schools visited, governors' reliance upon the presence of the link inspector for guidance limits development towards autonomy.

Support for management

78. The LEA provides a good level of support in many areas for senior and middle managers in schools to develop effective approaches to managing school improvement. Insufficient support is, however, given to headteachers and governors to evaluate critically the services they purchase to support school improvement.

79. The LEA has rightly recognised that the success of schools in the Wirral is related to good leadership and management in those schools. In order to enhance it further, it has prioritised support for leadership and management in the Education Development Plan. The LEA has invested heavily in the training, succession planning, recruitment and selection of school managers and, following their appointments, in supporting them. This support comes from the LEA's senior managers, the link inspector and the framework for self-evaluation, although the latter is new and not yet widely used. Inspection reports show that the quality of leadership and management of schools in the Wirral is good, and better than in similar LEAs or nationally.

80. The continuing professional development programme is of good quality. In accordance with the principles of Investors in People, the LEA is concerned with the professional development of all staff. The leadership and management programme is incremental and includes preparation for middle management and headship. A high number of headteachers and deputy headteachers are involved in National Professional Qualifications for Headteachers and the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers. Headteachers and deputy headteachers are well supported through other courses, conferences and support networks. The induction and mentoring programme for new headteachers in primary schools is effective, but there is some confusion among new secondary headteachers about the nature of the provision.

81. Heads of department in secondary schools and coordinators in primary schools have good access to courses and networks. These are valued by teachers and influence practice in school. On a two-year rolling programme, such staff have opportunities to become seconded advisory teachers. As well as sharing their good practice and expertise with other schools the experience benefits their own professional development and many go on to promoted posts in schools. This experience contributes to the high quality of school leadership and management in Wirral schools. Support and training for newly qualified teachers and their mentors are also of good quality.

82. Curriculum and management service support for headteachers visited during the inspection was, invariably, of good quality and highly valued.

Recommendations:

In order to bring monitoring, challenge, support and intervention in line with the Code of Practice for LEA-School Relations:

- conduct a full-scale review, involving all stakeholders, of inspection and advisory practice to ensure that schools become more aware of their own and the LEA's responsibilities;
- clearly deploy advisory and inspection resources in inverse proportion to success;
- offer greater flexibility regarding what schools can purchase, and more specificity in terms of what they will receive for their money, in the service level agreement for curriculum support.

In order to improve support for the curriculum use of ICT in schools:

- review and rationalise the roles and functions of the teams providing technical support and make them coherent with the curriculum team;
- focus curriculum support for schools on work in classrooms.

In order to improve support and intervention for schools causing concern:

- systematically share reports from advisers, inspectors and others to headteachers, with the chairs of governing bodies;
- draw up clearer strategies and criteria, in consultation with governors and headteachers, for the reduction or removal of support and intervention as appropriate.

In order to promote further autonomy in schools:

- provide support for head teachers and governing bodies to help them evaluate critically the services they purchase to support school improvement.

SECTION 3 – STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate planning

83. The Council has set three key priorities - to attract jobs; to secure delivery of high quality and effective services and to regenerate. In the absence of a corporate plan, these priorities and eight corporate objectives, one of which is to improve educational standards and opportunities (support lifelong learning opportunities for all), are set out in the Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP). The lack of a corporate plan is a weakness, but the BVPP is a good document, although its widespread distribution to school staff has created little impact.

84. The Education Department Strategic Plan 1999-2002 sets out the activities which support the Council's priorities and eight corporate objectives. Each EDP priority is linked directly to corporate key priorities and objectives and those of other named departments and organisations, creating a synergy between education and corporate planning. Progress on the implementation of plans is reported regularly to appropriate committees, including the Children's Panel, which is responsible for cross-cutting initiatives. However, there are weaknesses: the Children's Services Plan, for example, is out-of-date and unlikely to be replaced until April 2001 and operational links with social services remain weak, although improving.

85. The Council has maintained a traditional structure of eleven main committees: the education committee has one sub-committee which is concerned with school improvement, including OFSTED and monitoring reports. It is anticipated that the Council will develop a modernised structure in 2001. At present, the committee cycle and structure are not conducive to quick, open and effective decision making. The reports for the Education committee of 26 June 2000 covered 56 items and were over 1000 pages in length. The broad mixture of strategic and operational issues on the same agenda (EDP, removal of surplus places, provision for washing and changing pupils, swimming in Key Stages 1 and 2) militates against thorough debate of key issues. Inevitably, therefore, most items are 'agreed' behind closed doors in advance of the meeting, thus the process of decision-making is not transparent.

86. The Council has, until this year, based its financial decision-making on a system of setting savings targets for departments, then requiring them to propose areas for cuts in line with these. The final budget-setting involved negotiation between members about the areas for growth. However, there have been significant moves towards a more strategic and transparent approach for the 2001/2002 budget-setting process. A detailed three-year budget plan is required from departments this year, linked to their service development plans and the BVPP, following the introduction of global medium-term planning last year. Spending in growth areas will be informed by consultation. Headteachers and governors will be consulted much earlier in the process and invited to propose areas for savings and growth. These are positive steps towards improving the effectiveness of financial decision-making.

87. The quality of leadership shown by members and officers is sound. Neither the tight political balance, nor the existence of the unusual structural feature of the grammar schools, get in the way of the leadership of the main political groups on the education committee working well together in pursuit of the key objective of school improvement. Despite the unwieldy and opaque structures and mechanisms for decision-making, the director of education and his senior colleagues have led the way in successfully putting all of the required plans and strategies in place. Schools are improving, as is the attainment of pupils, and the LEA is highly thought of by schools, as illustrated in the school survey. Consultation and communication with schools is good.

88. The members and senior officers have the experience, quality, capacity and good will of the schools to take the LEA forward. Thus far, however, they have chosen not to take the tough leadership decisions which would necessarily confront powerful vested interest groups in relation to adopting key principles of the Code of Practice on LEA-school relations, and developing a strategy for inclusion of pupils with special educational needs. In these areas they prefer an incremental approach, a number of steps behind the pace of Government policy.

89. The Council and the education department have been very successful in achieving co-ordinated action in support of priorities involving inter-agency collaboration. Education takes the lead in the crime and disorder strategy and Local Agenda 21 in schools where it delivers education for sustainable development, citizenship and democracy. It is fully integrated into Social Regeneration Budget schemes and is deriving substantial financial benefit from them. More recently, strategic collaboration between departments of the Council has improved significantly and the chief executive has been instrumental in driving forward that approach. It was indicative of his level of personal commitment to school improvement that he became a governor of the LEA's only failing mainstream school and, following his experience, is encouraging all senior officers of the Council to follow suit.

Management services

90. All Wirral's management services are focused on schools' needs and most are effective. They are bought back by all primary schools and the majority of secondary schools. At schools' request, the agreements are for two or three years to allow stability and it is clear that few primary schools are ready to consider alternative service providers or able to evaluate the value for money of the services they buy. Charges are not yet clearly linked to the level of service received by the schools. The relatively small number of managers of these services are usually experts in their service area and combine service provision with responsibility for strategic planning. As a result the service itself is often more effective than the strategy and plans suggest.

91. The LEA has undertaken a series of Best Value reviews of most of its management services. At the time of the inspection, the outcomes had not been reported to committee. As a result of these reviews, and the development of the Private Finance Initiative bid, Wirral is actively exploring new approaches to service delivery. It intends to apply for DfEE pilot funding to develop a facilities management

service, which would encompass many of the services in this section, in partnership with private sector providers. This is an innovative and welcome development.

92. **Financial support** to those schools which buy the enhanced level of service, from the education department's local management and information services team, is good, responsive and proactive. The team is quick to challenge overspending by schools and has assisted seven schools to develop satisfactory deficit reduction plans. A particularly high proportion of special schools (72 per cent) have budget surpluses of over 5 percent, with one as high as 18 percent, while one school has a 7 per cent deficit. These unacceptable variations are the result of weaknesses in the special schools funding formula. There are weaknesses in the corporate financial and payroll systems which lead to errors in charges to school budgets.

93. The small **personnel** team is well-organised and efficient and provides a very good service which is highly valued by schools. Eight of the 19 schools visited had received support with casework from two senior personnel officers and all rated this highly, though the procedures were sometimes slower than they would have liked. Some schools had problems with high sickness levels among staff and welcomed the recent guidance from the LEA as a way of tackling this.

94. The quality of **building support** for schools' day to day repairs and maintenance is uneven. Under the standard service, which most schools buy, each school has a designated building inspector who makes regular frequent visits, helps to organise repairs and updates the condition survey. The schools visited had variable views of the support they received, reflecting primarily the quality of their building inspector, with some being very positive and others complaining of slow responses. Those schools where capital work had taken place were positive about the way this was managed by the LEA and emergency support is good.

95. **ICT support** is satisfactory overall though the different areas of support are variable in quality. It is provided under a series of service level agreements by three different teams who respectively deal with hardware (technical support), networked systems (systems support) and administrative software (IT support). They have three different help lines for schools seeking support and not all schools visited were clear about which they should ring with a particular problem. There have been a series of reorganisations affecting the teams, which are currently located together under the same manager, but there have been particular problems retaining staff in the ICT support team which has reduced the quality of the support for administrative ICT.

96. Technical support and training is good, inexpensive and wide-ranging and schools particularly value the on-site support and replacement machines supplied. However, day to day support for IT in administration is less satisfactory with some schools reporting slow responses to helpline calls due to the staff shortages. The recent Best Value review rightly proposed the amalgamation of the IT and systems teams to provide a more coherent and flexible service to schools with a single point of contact.

Recommendations:

In order to develop schools' role as informed purchasers of services:

- ensure schools are fully involved in the development and costing of the facilities management service and are given information about approved alternative providers.

SECTION 4 - SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Strategy

97. There are proportionately more special schools, more pupils in special schools, and more pupils in out-of-Borough special schools than in comparative LEAs or nationally. All the more reason for the LEA to implement the Government's policy of increased levels of inclusion of pupils in mainstream schools than at present. It has not done so.

98. The LEA maintains 11 special schools and the special school population is rising. Special schools are inequitably funded and the provision does not sufficiently closely match the needs of pupils, hence the number of expensive, out-of-Borough placements for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties to which the LEA is committed.

99. Action to remedy the situation has been slow and uncertain, and remains so. There is at present no clear vision of a future pattern of provision to meet the needs of pupils with SEN in Wirral more effectively. In January 1999, the LEA established a 20 member Special Needs Advisory Committee with a remit to develop a set of principles and consider how they could be put into practice. After almost two years, the principles are agreed but there is no certainty about the means or the timescale by which the principles will be taken forward and developed into policy, strategy or action. A conference of interested parties in November 2000 built on the principles, but key issues raised in 1997/8 by district audit as requiring attention within SEN provision remain outstanding.

100. The LEA finds itself caught in a dilemma. On the one hand it is encouraged by national policy to increase levels of inclusion: on the other hand, special schools are successful and popular in Wirral, particularly with parents, and any attempt to rationalise them would meet with parental opposition. Nevertheless, the time taken to translate principles into practice is too long and creates uncertainty for all concerned.

Meeting statutory duties

101. The LEA issues slightly more than the national average of statements, and the number is increasing yearly. It does not regard the present, higher than average, proportion of pupils with statements as a serious problem. The LEA is planning to provide more support at Stage 3 of the Code of Practice in order to reduce demand and halt or reverse the year on year growth. However, it inappropriately continues to maintain statements, for example in the transition between primary and secondary schools, as a reassurance to parents and schools, when sometimes no additional resource is identified. The recent introduction of 'exit criteria' into statements, to make clear when support will be withdrawn on improvement, is a wise strategy.

102. Seven out of ten statements, above the metropolitan and national averages, are prepared within time limits set by national guidelines when medical advice is received on time. Less satisfactory, from a parent's viewpoint, is that late medical

advice means, in actuality, fewer than half of statements are issued on time. Other delays are attributable to the late provision of advice by the educational psychology service (EPS), which is understaffed. Targets for the timely completion of advice by the EPS are currently low and these are far from likely to be met in the near future. The task faced by the EPS is made more challenging by the high and increasing number of assessments processed.

103. The LEA attends a reasonable proportion of pupils' annual reviews, and prioritises those to be attended appropriately. Arrangements for liaison with parents are good and a parent/partnership scheme is in place.

104. The SEN support service has begun the process of reviewing the LEA criteria for progression through the Stages of the Code of Practice and for entry or exit in respect of SEN classes and support, where necessary helpfully clarifying guidance and re-setting the thresholds which trigger or cease provision. This is good practice.

School improvement

105. The special schools are well managed, successful, and are well regarded by parents. Special classes in mainstream schools and dedicated support services have helped to move towards improving the match between provision and needs, although levels of inclusion are too variable.

106. The re-organisation of the learning support services in 1996 provided a sound basis for development. The unified service and its individual elements are each effectively managed and are well regarded by schools. The support service is responsible for a number of projects enhancing the achievements of pupils with SEN. However, the LEA also employs 65 full time equivalent (fte) nursery nurses and 215 fte welfare assistants to support pupils in mainstream schools with statements: this is more staff than the rest of the department put together. These staff do not appear under any of the LEA's management structures because once they are designated to pupils and schools, they are managed, *de facto*, by school headteachers, although employed centrally by the LEA. This is an unsatisfactory arrangement and the LEA is at the early stages of discussions regarding the future delegation of this responsibility as part of the review of the LMS formula.

107. The means of deployment of support teams, their school development projects, the provision of courses for teachers and of cluster meetings and courses for schools' special needs coordinators, are all well designed to enhance the capability of schools to meet special needs without external support. A large scale initiative to improve schools' writing of individual education plans was imminent at the time of the inspection. However, these strategies have not yet influenced the rising demand for statements and special school places for pupils with learning and behavioural difficulties, or the large numbers of pupils referred for support at Stage 3 of the Code of Practice.

108. The recent appointment of a specialist SEN inspector is a positive development in the process of improvement of SEN provision both in special and mainstream schools.

Value for money

109. The special schools funding formula is inequitable. The funding allocated to schools with high proportions of places in the lower bands of need is too low, while funding to those schools with places for pupils in the more severe bands is relatively generous. The LEA has been slow to confront the problem. Despite an independent review commissioned by the LEA which confirmed this inequity, the formula for funding special schools has not been reviewed. Instead the LEA has agreed with special schools that additional funding above inflation will be directed towards the more under-funded bands. This strategy will not redress the balance of funding quickly enough.

110. Until 1998/9, overall funding to support pupils with SEN was in line with, or slightly below similar LEAs. Overspending on support for pupils in mainstream schools with statements and pupils placed in out-of-borough independent schools in 1999/2000 has driven significant budgetary growth in these areas in 2000/01.

111. Apart from the perusal of annual reviews of statements, the LEA, in common with many authorities, has no way of analysing improvements in pupils' attainment and progress against the significant additional investment made. It has, therefore, no sound means by which to measure the value for money received.

Recommendation:

In order to improve SEN provision:

- set out a policy, strategy and action plan for SEN, including a clear and unambiguous statement about inclusion:
- improve the match of provision to need and reduce the number of out-of-Borough placements;
- improve the timeliness of the statutory assessment process including advice received from educational psychologists and health service colleagues; and
- revise the weighting and funding of the SEN bands in the special schools funding formula on the basis of a need-led analysis, and implement the changes as soon as possible.

SECTION 5 - ACCESS

Planning of school places

112. Wirral's approach to the removal of surplus primary school places is satisfactory. Relationships between the dioceses and the LEA are good and planning is collaborative. There are above-average proportions of surplus places in Wirral primary schools and these increased between 1998/1999 and 1999/2000 owing to a decrease in the primary-age population. Many are in Birkenhead and in voluntary schools. The updated School Organisation Plan recognises the need to remove 4,435 primary places by 2005 to reach a target of 10 per cent above pupil numbers. The LEA plans to meet this target by gradually removing the surplus capacity through alternative use of accommodation for ICT, early years provision and after-school activities and the removal of temporary classrooms. It also expects the new DfEE sufficiency calculations (which it has been involved in piloting) to reduce capacities. In addition, published capital projects and the PFI will remove 150 places from primary schools in 2000/01 and a further 960 places by 2003.

113. In secondary schools the proportion of surplus places is below average and decreasing. However, there are a few schools with surplus places in Birkenhead, particularly in the aided sector. The Education Committee decided not to support a Catholic diocesan proposal to relocate a Catholic secondary school in this area with a very high proportion of surplus places, which is now likely to be closed. The LEA's PFI project will combine reductions in the capacity of eight secondary schools with new building and renovation.

Admissions

114. The arrangements for admissions in the Wirral are generally satisfactory, although the process of 11+ testing before parents state a preference for a secondary school has recently been determined to be unfair by the admissions adjudicator. The secondary appeals timetable is unsatisfactory in that it is not completed until late in July.

115. Wirral coordinates admissions to all maintained primary and secondary schools, including the voluntary aided and foundation schools. The admissions booklets are clear and attractively presented. Admissions to community primary schools are based on catchment areas. Secondary admissions in the Wirral are complex owing to the combination of selective and non-selective admissions arrangements.

116. There have been two successful challenges to the recently revised admissions practices, through the admissions adjudicator, by two all-ability Catholic high schools. In summer 1999, the practice of elevating the second preference of pupils who failed to gain a grammar school place to a first preference was ruled unfair and discontinued. In July 2000, the practice of allowing pupils to take the 11+ test before expressing a preference for a secondary school was also ruled unfair. The Education Committee recently decided to apply for judicial review of the latter determination on the basis that there was clear local consultation and all-party agreement on the policy.

117. There is a relatively high number of appeals for places at Wirral secondary schools, though these dropped from 705 in 1999, to 622 in 2000, and about one fifth are upheld. The allocation of secondary places takes several months due to a complex process of re-examining children with borderline 11+ results so the appeals process does not begin until July and is complete in 3-4 weeks. This is unsatisfactory as it is too late to allow pupils to visit the high school to which they will transfer. Despite an option presented by officers, members did not support abandoning the borderline process.

118. The LEA's **asset management planning** (AMP) is strong and effective. The AMP is sound: there is a local policy statement which accords closely with DfEE requirements, condition surveys of all schools have been carried out satisfactorily and a seconded teacher is carrying out suitability assessments of secondary schools. There has been a long-term lack of capital investment in buildings but New Deal for Schools and Capital Challenge are beginning to have an impact in reducing the repairs backlog. However, although the asset management planning process has made the priorities for capital investment more explicit, and schools are well informed about new initiatives, many schools are still frustrated by the long time lag before non-emergency work is undertaken. Schools are clear about their repairs and maintenance responsibilities though they currently vary in their capacity to discharge these. The LEA has offered well-targeted training to encourage a more planned approach and carries out annual monitoring visits.

119. The LEA has invested considerable resources in developing a significant Private Finance Initiative (PFI) project which aims to resolve a range of serious premises issues. These include issues arising from condition and suitability surveys and the replacement of mobile accommodation at eight secondary schools and one primary school. It also includes provision of facilities management for the next 25 years. The LEA has successfully developed the proposal to timescale: the preferred bidder has recently been announced and the next stage is to produce a costed specification which headteachers and governors have to approve. It is the second 'grouped schools scheme' in England and one of ten DfEE pathfinder projects. Schools have rightly been involved from the beginning of the process.

Promoting social inclusion

120. Priority 8 of the EDP is to increase inclusion in education. It is based on an analysis of need, which accurately identifies poor attendance and disaffection in a minority of secondary schools. Appropriate objectives are to reduce unauthorised absence and exclusions, motivate the disaffected and improve attendance. All activities have contributed towards making progress in achieving these objectives but some, such as reducing unauthorised absence further and providing full-time education otherwise than at school, are proving particularly stubborn. The revised EDP has moved the focus of activity towards a more preventative approach targeted at primary aged pupils. This is sensible as long as it does not detract from making continued progress towards meeting the original core objectives.

121. **Support for improving attendance** is getting better but key weaknesses remain. Levels of attendance and unauthorised absence in primary schools are in

line with statistical neighbours and national averages; in secondary schools unauthorised absence is below national averages, but so is the level of attendance. Six out of 23 secondary schools have levels of attendance below 90 per cent. In 1999/2000 the LEA has fallen slightly behind its challenging target to reduce unauthorised absence.

122. The Education Social Welfare Service (ESWS), whose aim is to improve attendance and reduce unauthorised absence, is comparatively small in size and low in cost. Its activities, as set out in the Education Development Plan, are sensibly conceived but not sufficiently focussed on outcomes. A modest amount of externally funded project work is well targeted at those schools in greatest need: the service provided to those schools with least need is appropriately minimalist. Clear guidance and criteria for involvement are given to schools in the handbook 'Attendance Matters', but this has not permeated into schools who still have expectations of levels of service that are nostalgic and unrealistic. At the time of inspection, following a critical district audit report, schools were being presented with an opportunity to increase their autonomy and take more control of the service. The Excellence in Cities initiative has the potential to be a catalyst for such a development in secondary schools.

123. The ESWS fulfils some central functions satisfactorily, including truancy sweeps and parental prosecutions, but fails to support the necessary levels of attendance of pupils whom the LEA has placed in out-of-borough, independent special schools. Six pupils in one such school collectively attended for less than half the time in 1999/2000. At an average cost of £20,000 per place per annum, that means the LEA wasted £60,000 on independent school fees for pupils who were not attending. The LEA's, and the service's, response to referrals regarding such pupils is lethargic. Additionally, the LEA's practice of automatically placing permanently excluded pupils on the roll of the Link Centre (Pupil Referral Unit), even though their prospects of attending are minimal, is flawed and unsatisfactory.

124. **Support for improving behaviour and reducing exclusions** is good in practice but was not well developed strategically until very recently. The Behaviour Support Plan is a good document but the implementation of its key activities is weak. Some have only been implemented in part and others have slipped beyond deadlines. Attempts have been made to establish an over-arching structure to the management of such provision but, at the time of the inspection, management was temporary and proposals to change the categorisation of a special school had been postponed. The Education Committee decided to refer this proposal to the Special Needs Advisory Committee, a forum which lacks the necessary pace of decision-making. In contrast, the planning in the Excellence in Cities document in relation to the introduction of Learning Support Units linked to a learning mentor scheme is well thought out and the review of the Behaviour Support Plan is an excellent document.

125. Despite weaknesses in strategic planning, outcomes are very good. The number of permanent exclusions continued its four year downward trend from 61 to 49 in 1999-2000, even ahead of the 2000-2001 target, and the number of fixed term exclusions is under control. School inspection reports judge behaviour to be good in far more schools than national or statistical neighbour averages.

126. The LEA contribution to this positive picture is broadly based. Targeted primary schools have benefited from the support of the newly appointed Behaviour Support Coordinator who has delivered and brokered training and introduced self-supporting programmes. One primary school, in an extremely socio-economically deprived area, has benefited from targeted funding over three years to develop inclusive strategies: in the first year of the programme it has reduced unauthorised absence by half and has no permanent exclusions. In secondary schools, the LEA has been at the forefront of supporting in-school centres using Standards Fund monies which will be developed further with the granting of Excellence in Cities status to the area. Good quality outreach teaching support is delivered from the EBD school, although nine of its own pupils are educated at home receiving only three hours of provision per week. The common feature of such LEA support is that the responsibility for good pupil behaviour remains with the schools themselves. The LEA has, thus far, resisted the temptation to establish any form of behaviour support team despite the consistently held view in the secondary schools visited that LEA support is insufficient.

127. The strategic weaknesses cut across to the linked **provision of education otherwise than at school.**

128. The core provision is the pupil referral unit. In September 2000, this provision served the needs of 30 pupils at Key Stage 3 and 55 pupils at Key Stage 4, 80 per cent of whom are educated off-site through the college placement scheme, or in preparation for it.

129. Every pupil who is permanently excluded and not found a new school place is placed on the register of the PRU, whatever the prospects of his/her attendance. This has an immediate impact on attendance rates at the PRU which still rarely rise above 50 per cent, as noted in an otherwise largely positive inspection report of 1997. Added to this, PRU-based Key Stage 4 provision for 12 pupils, and a preparation course for college placement for 33 Key Stage 4 pupils, are only part-time. Thus, half the registered pupils are not receiving full-time education. This remains unsatisfactory despite the strenuous efforts of staff to keep track of pupils and encourage attendance.

130. However, the majority of Key Stage 4 pupils registered at the PRU go on to pursue accredited courses through the college placement scheme: this is a well managed scheme, with consistent LEA support, that offers opportunities to pupils who would otherwise 'drop out' of education altogether. In addition, the LEA acts successfully as enabler to a number of other projects providing extended work experience with local employers leading to full-time employment for some school leavers. At times, individual LEA and youth work staff go to extraordinary lengths to promote the interests of such pupils who would otherwise reject the system.

131. The LEA has sound procedures in place for inspecting the education provided for pupils whose parents choose to educate them at home. However, the inspection of the education received by a small number of children in public care who are placed in independently owned children's homes in various parts of the country, and attendance at their statutory reviews, is inconsistent. This is poor and requires immediate remedy.

132. Otherwise, **support for children in public care** in Wirral schools is improving. A six strong team of teaching staff, formerly employed in the Social Services Department, was appropriately transferred to the Education Department in November 1999. It has a complete picture of all children in public care, including their attainment at all key stages, but the LEA's ability to analyse this data to measure improvement is hampered by it being in manual form. A clear and straightforward protocol was circulated to schools in January 2000 and the majority of schools have designated a teacher for this purpose; personal education plans are not as comprehensively in place yet. Those schools visited were positive about the LEA's efforts and although critical of the Social Services Department, recent improvements were noted. The brief report presented to the Children's Panel in January 2000 was exemplary.

133. Sound procedures are in place to ensure **the health, safety and protection of pupils**. The LEA is appropriately represented on the Area Child Protection Committee and all but six designated teachers have received training, and training for these staff is planned.

134. Health and Safety provision by Wirral is proactive and effective. The LEA health and safety policy is clear and detailed, guidance for schools is up-to-date, schools are consulted and trained on issues and there is a programme of regular audits of schools. The LEA analyses accident statistics and uses the analysis to monitor trends. Schools were universally positive about the quality and effectiveness of the health and safety support they received and particularly praised the useful audit reports.

135. The LEA provides **support to improve the attainment of pupils of minority ethnic heritage** through the Teaching English as an Additional Language Team (TEAL). There are few minority ethnic pupils in the LEA's schools. They amount to only 1.4 per cent of the population and are culturally diverse. There are no travellers' sites in Wirral and no children presently on roll. Contingency plans are in place and a general inspector has links with the Cheshire Travellers' consortium. The service provided for travellers is satisfactory.

136. The Education Committee has recognised the importance of support to pupils of minority ethnic heritage. The large shortfall in the funding for TEAL service was met this year by the LEA. Funding is held centrally and schools are able to access the TEAL services on request. The EDP gives appropriate emphasis to raising the attainment of pupils from different ethnic groups, including targeted training for literacy coordinators.

137. In the period 1999-2000, the LEA had a team of five teachers who supported 142 pupils from 26 countries speaking 23 different languages in 46 primary schools and 12 secondary schools. The main heritage groups represented are Bangladeshi, Hong Kong and Vietnamese. Schools surveyed and visited during the inspection reported general satisfaction with the support provided.

138. Data on pupils of ethnic minority heritage is in the early stage of development. The LEA has information about the numbers of pupils represented in

each ethnic group but systems are not yet in place for tracking individual pupils' attainment, attendance and exclusions. A target of all pupils reaching level 4 in English has been set but it is not clear at what age pupils should achieve this.

139. The LEA has taken appropriate **measures to promote racial equality and combat racism** in schools. The committee adopted the Standards for Racial Equality in Schools in June 2000. A helpful guidance document on dealing with racial harassment and reporting racist incidents was produced in 1998. Headteachers and governors are aware of the procedures outlined in the guidance. Evidence of schools reporting racist incidents to the LEA and taking action to tackle racism was found on school visits. The Education Committee monitors reports submitted by schools. Further evidence of commitment to improving racial equality is contained in the Education Departments strategic plan 2000-2001, where an activity promotes awareness raising regarding teaching and learning about cultural traditions and ways of helping pupils to respect their own culture and that of others. In-service training to support this is available for teachers. Overall, the LEA has responded comprehensively to the recommendations of the Macpherson Report of the Inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence.

140. The LEA has taken the lead and made an impressive start in **supporting gifted and talented pupils** and used the strategy as a means of raising expectations of all pupils, their parents and the local community. Existing good practice has been built on to produce a helpful policy that informs imaginative plans for the Excellence in Cities funded initiative.

141. The LEA has established a steering group for gifted and talented pupils representing a range of interested professionals. This group has recently drawn up a policy for supporting gifted and talented pupils in primary and secondary schools. The policy is based on an inclusive approach that recognises diverse talents and high attainment in all schools. Existing good practice has informed the policy for instance the work of the Wirral Able Children Centre; 'Old Masters Young Poets' project; mathematics bridging initiative; sports, arts and music provision; and the Aim Higher initiative based at John Moores University in Liverpool. The policy defines a useful working definition for gifted and talented pupils, clearly outlines roles and responsibilities and makes helpful recommendations for action for schools and the LEA.

142. The Excellence in Cities initiative planned by secondary school headteachers and the LEA is linked appropriately to this work. The intention is to raise expectations of pupils and the local community by supporting and celebrating success in a wide range of endeavours. A LEA coordinator and school based coordinators are currently being appointed to take forward the initiative. High profile events are planned to launch the initiative with the intention of raising awareness and the involvement of the local and business community and further and higher education.

Recommendations:

To ensure that the growth of surplus places in primary schools is controlled:

- keep primary places under review, particularly in the Birkenhead area.

In order that all pupils have accepted a secondary school place before the end of the summer term:

- amend the admissions timetable to ensure that all first appeals have been completed by the end of June.

In order to further promote social inclusion:

- improve the monitoring of the attendance and education of pupils in independent, out-of-borough special schools and the PRU and make more effort to engage them in full-time educational provision;
- increase the provision for pupils educated otherwise than at school to full-time, in line with the recommendations of DfEE Circular 10/99. Set out an action plan with clear timescales for this purpose;
- improve the systems for target-setting for pupils of ethnic minority heritage including tracking attainment, attendance and exclusions.

APPENDIX

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to bring monitoring, challenge, support and intervention in line with the Code of Practice for LEA-School Relations:

- conduct a full-scale review, involving all stakeholders, of inspection and advisory practice to ensure that schools become more aware of their own and the LEA's responsibilities;
- clearly deploy advisory and inspection resources in inverse proportion to success;
- offer greater flexibility regarding what schools can purchase, and more specificity in terms of what they will receive for their money, in the service level agreement for curriculum support.

In order to improve support for the curriculum use of ICT in schools:

- review and rationalise the roles and functions of the teams providing technical support and make them coherent with the curriculum team;
- focus curriculum support for schools on work in classrooms.

In order to improve support and intervention for schools causing concern:

- systematically share reports from advisers, inspectors and others to headteachers, with the chairs of governing bodies;
- draw up clearer strategies and criteria, in consultation with governors and headteachers, for the reduction or removal of support and intervention as appropriate.

In order to promote further autonomy in schools:

- provide support for head teachers and governing bodies to help them evaluate critically the services they purchase to support school improvement.

In order to develop schools' role as informed purchasers of services:

- ensure schools are fully involved in the development and costing of the facilities management service and are given information about approved alternative providers.

In order to improve SEN provision:

- set out a policy, strategy and action plan for SEN, including a clear and unambiguous statement about inclusion:

- improve the match of provision to need and reduce the number of out-of-Borough placements;
- improve the timeliness of the statutory assessment process including advice received from educational psychologists and health service colleagues; and
- revise the weighting and funding of the SEN bands in the special schools funding formula on the basis of a need-led analysis, and implement the changes as soon as possible.

To ensure that the growth of surplus places in primary schools is controlled:

- keep primary places under review, particularly in the Birkenhead area.

In order that all pupils have accepted a secondary school place before the end of the summer term:

- amend the admissions timetable to ensure that all first appeals have been completed by the end of June.

In order to further promote social inclusion:

- improve the monitoring of the attendance and education of pupils in independent, out-of-borough special schools and the PRU and make more effort to engage them in full-time educational provision;
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