



**OFFICE FOR STANDARDS  
IN EDUCATION**

**INSPECTION OF  
WEST BERKSHIRE  
LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

**September 2001**

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

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## **APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS**

## INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection was carried out by OFSTED in conjunction with the Audit Commission under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The inspection also took account of the Local Government Act 1999 insofar as it relates to the work undertaken by the local education authority (LEA) on Best Value. 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.

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 education services and other parts of the council 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 82 per cent.

3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to 15 schools. The inspection focused on statutory school ages and did not include support for early years or post-16 education to any great extent. 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.

## COMMENTARY

4. West Berkshire was established as a unitary authority in 1998, following local government reorganisation of Berkshire. The authority is relatively small, in terms of pupil numbers, compared to other unitary authorities. The authority serves a mix of urban and rural areas, with a predominance of rural areas in the north and west. There is a high proportion of small primary schools. It is an affluent area with low unemployment and low levels of social deprivation. At the time of the inspection, an acting corporate director of education had been in post for six months. Following a strategic review of all its services, the council is moving to a children and young people's service grouping, to include education, children and families, and culture and youth services. At the time of the inspection, the council had been unable to make a permanent appointment to the new post of corporate director for children and young people's services.

5. The LEA inherited schools from Berkshire which generally performed well by national standards, no schools were in special measures, and only one school with serious weaknesses. Schools have continued to perform well under West Berkshire. Attainment at all key stages is well above national averages: it is above that of similar authorities at Key Stage 2 and GCSE and in line with it at other key stages. The rate of improvement is broadly in line with the national trend at Key Stage 2 and above it for higher grade GCSEs. There are currently no schools in special measures or with serious weaknesses.

6. The prime objectives for the LEA when it was first established were to gain the trust of schools and to make a smooth transfer from a large county to a small unitary authority. The LEA has been successful in achieving these objectives. It enjoys good relationships with all types of school, including former grant-maintained schools. The LEA knows its schools well and consults effectively. Schools have confidence in the LEA and support for school improvement is generally effective. Weaknesses are mainly to do with the quality of management services and the arrangements for purchasing them.

7. The LEA's strengths significantly outweigh its weaknesses, which are few. The LEA is already taking steps to address a number of its shortcomings. Strengths include:

- expertise of staff in services to support school improvement;
- support for literacy and numeracy;
- support for schools causing concern;
- support for governors;
- quality of advice provided to elected members;
- partnerships with other bodies;
- support for information and communication technology administration;
- provision for special educational needs;
- admission arrangements; and
- support for children in public care.

Weaknesses include:

- financial services;
- buildings maintenance;
- school meals and cleaning;
- aspects of support for attendance; and
- implementation of measures to combat racism.

8. The LEA has capitalised on the benefits and sought to minimise the disadvantages of being small through arrangements with other LEAs and private providers, buying in consultants and using existing expertise in its schools. The LEA now needs to clarify its longer term role as a small LEA and decide which services it is going to provide itself, which it is going to broker and which it is not going to provide in order to meet the very different needs of its schools.

9. Members and senior officers provide very sound leadership, and the LEA is well managed. There is a strong corporate commitment to education and cross-party agreement on priorities. Statutory plans have been put in place within Department for Education Skills deadlines. The delay in making an appointment to the new combined corporate director post has not had any major impact on the performance of the service.

10. The education development plan provides a sound basis for school improvement and progress in implementing it has been satisfactory. However, the actions underpinning one of the priorities lack coherence and some activities are insufficiently targeted on particular schools or groups of pupils. Schools are making good progress towards meeting the LEA's statutory targets and the 2002 Key Stage 2 target for mathematics has been increased to ensure it remains challenging.

11. Quality managers (link advisers) and consultants are well regarded and effective, particularly in schools where the LEA has identified concerns. Schools' targets are challenged when they are insufficiently ambitious. Schools causing concern have rigorous action plans. However, for other schools there is not always sufficient challenge to their plans for raising standards to meet these targets. There is no formal system of written reporting to 'light touch' schools on their overall performance.

12. Members are committed to maintaining education expenditure at the standard spending assessment (SSA). The LEA delegates a relatively high proportion of the budget to schools and the cost of providing most services is low. Financial management is sound but there are mounting pressures on budgets, particularly for special educational needs and early years support. There was good consultation with schools on the Fair Funding arrangements but the pace and quality of implementation have been unsatisfactory.

13. Overall, West Berkshire has made a good start as a new authority and made very sound progress, given its short existence. The LEA certainly has the capacity to improve further and to implement the recommendations made in this report.

## **SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

### **Context**

14. West Berkshire was established as a unitary authority in 1998 following local government reorganisation of Berkshire. The authority is a mix of urban and rural areas, with a predominance of rural areas in the north and west. The main concentrations of population are in Newbury, Hungerford, Thatcham and Tilehurst.

15. West Berkshire is an affluent area. It is ranked in the lowest 10 per cent of authorities in terms of social deprivation. Unemployment is very low and 47 per cent of residents are in social classes one and two, compared to 31 per cent nationally. Fewer than eight per cent of primary pupils and six per cent of secondary pupils are entitled to free school meals, well below the national averages of 19.7 per cent and 17.6 per cent. As with nearly all areas, there are some pockets of social deprivation.

16. The authority has a pupil population of about 24,000, below the average of 27,000 for unitary authorities. The proportion of pupils of minority ethnic origin is less than three per cent and the proportion of pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) is less than half the national average. The proportion of pupils with statements of special educational need (SEN) is about one per cent above the national average for both primary and secondary aged pupils. The proportion of pupils attending independent schools is similar to that found nationally.

17. There are ten secondary schools, 68 primary schools, two special schools, two nursery schools and three pupil referral units. Three secondary schools and two primary schools were formerly grant maintained. A grant-maintained school and an LEA maintained school were closed in 1999 and combined to form a new community secondary school. The age of transfer to secondary schools is 11. All secondary schools are comprehensive and all have sixth forms. Six secondary schools have been awarded specialist college status and another is a Beacon school. Three primary schools also have Beacon status. The LEA has a considerable number of small primary schools, located mainly in the rural areas. One in three primary schools have fewer than 100 pupils. West Berkshire attracts a high number of pupils from neighbouring LEAs, particularly to its secondary schools.

### **Performance**

- Evidence from OFSTED inspections indicates that pupils' attainment on entry to full time education is significantly above the national average and above that of statistical neighbours<sup>1</sup>.
- Results in tests at key stages 1-3 and GCSE are well above national averages. Key Stage 2 and GCSE results are above statistical neighbours and broadly in line with them for other key stages. For example, at Key Stage 2 in 2000, 80.1 per cent of pupils achieved Level 4 and above in English, compared to the

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<sup>1</sup> West Berkshire's statistical neighbours are: Dorset, Herefordshire, Cambridgeshire, North Somerset, Bracknell Forest, South Gloucestershire, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Devon and Buckinghamshire.

national average of 75 per cent and the statistical neighbour average of 77.8 per cent. The proportion of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C was 56.8 per cent, compared to the national average of 47.4 per cent and a statistical neighbour average of 53.8 per cent. No school in 2000 had fewer than 40 per cent of pupils attaining five or more grades A\*-C.

- The average points score for pupils taking two or more advanced level examinations or advanced GNVQs in 2000 was in line with the national average and statistical neighbours.
- Rates of improvement between 1997 and 2000 are broadly in line with national trends at Key Stage 2 and above them for GCSE and advanced level examinations. Pupils' progress between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 and between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 is above the national average and in line with it between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4.
- OFSTED inspections show that West Berkshire has an above average proportion of primary and secondary schools judged overall to be good or very good. The rate of improvement in the proportion of schools where the quality of education was judged to be good or very good was above that found nationally. The proportion of lessons where teaching was judged to be satisfactory or better is broadly in line with the national average in primary schools and above it in secondary schools.
- The proportion of schools identified by OFSTED as causing concern is well below the national average: since the LEA came into existence, only one school, a pupil referral unit (PRU), has been subject to special measures and one school identified with serious weaknesses. There are currently no schools in these categories.
- Attendance in primary and secondary schools is above the national and statistical neighbour averages. Unauthorised absences are below national and statistical neighbour averages. The most recent data shows that no school has less than 90 per cent attendance.

## **Funding**

18. West Berkshire's education standard spending assessment (SSA) per pupil for 2001/2002 is slightly above its statistical neighbours but below the unitary average by 2.9 per cent and below the average for England by 7.4 per cent. The council has received an education SSA increase in excess of the national average for the past two years.

19. Since it secured unitary status in 1998, the council has spent at, or marginally above, the education SSA. In 2001/2002 the council passed on the education SSA increase through to the education budget. West Berkshire has taken up all of its Standards Fund options.

20. The level of delegation for 2000/2001 is high at 86.5 per cent, compared with an average of 84.2 per cent in unitary authorities, and this is set to increase further in

2001/2002 to 88.7 per cent . Individual school budgets (ISB) per pupil for 2000/2001 are above the unitary average for primary schools, below for secondary schools and significantly below for special schools. Details are shown in the following table.

£ per pupil (ISB)	Primary Funding	Secondary Funding	Special Funding
West Berkshire *	1,859	2,435	7,356
Unitary	1,807	2,524	8,560
England	1,869	2,559	9,357

Source: CIPFA 2000/2001 (\* West Berkshire figures recalculated due to incorrect pupil numbers being originally submitted)

21. Centrally retained funding is low at £393 per pupil, compared to the unitary authority average of £427 and £446 nationally. The cost of services, with two exceptions, is well below the unitary and national averages. School transport is £32 per pupil higher than the national average of £68 and the budget for independent special school fees is £15 per pupil higher than the national average of £42 (CIPFA, 2000/2001).

22. The LEA has appropriately reviewed its school funding formula in partnership with schools' representatives from all sectors. Although the funding model is complex and exceeds current resources, it enables the LEA to identify relative need more accurately.

23. Because of its socio-economic profile, the council does not benefit from major programmes of government funding focused on urban deprivation or community regeneration. Education capital expenditure is financed mainly from the debt free fund, with only 11 per cent in 2000/2001 funded by capital grant. The major capital project for education is the building of a new secondary school, costing over £4m.

### **Council structure**

24. There are 54 councillors: 28 Liberal Democrats, 25 Conservatives and one Independent. The council currently operates with an education committee of 12 elected members and additional members. Until shortly before the inspection, the council operated an education committee. There was also a joint sub-committee, which reported to both education and social services committees, and a standards and effectiveness committee. Decision making arrangements generally work well. Following recent consultation on possible options for a modernised structure, the decision has been taken to operate a leader and cabinet model. Scrutiny arrangements include a select committee for children and young people, reflecting the new service grouping. The continuance of the standards and effectiveness panel is intended to further strengthen arrangements for monitoring the work of schools and the education service. As in other authorities, there are some concerns about possible loss of representation resulting from the modernised structure.

25. The education service is organised into two areas: school services and quality and pupil and student services. Following a strategic review of all its services, the council agreed to create a children and young people's service grouping, headed by a corporate director. This grouping includes education, children and families, and culture and youth services. The rationale for this new post is to provide a better and more 'joined up' service, in line with central government thinking. There is strong support for this across the council and in schools, although a minority of headteachers have concerns that the present high priority for education could be compromised by the wider spread of responsibility. At the time of the inspection, despite two attempts, the council had been unable to make an appointment to the new post. A secondee, from another LEA, was appointed from June 2001 to lead the work in this area, although the intention remains to seek a permanent appointment. An acting corporate director of education has been in post since the departure of the previous director in November 2000. The failure to appoint a corporate director of children and young people's services and having an acting director of education in post have not impeded progress in the education service.

### **The Education Development Plan**

26. The LEA's education development plan (EDP) is sound and provides a feasible strategy for school improvement. The EDP for 1999-2002 was given full approval by the DfES. The LEA was revising its EDP during the inspection but the priorities remain to:

- meet the improvement needs of individual schools;
- improve standards of attainment in literacy;
- improve standards of attainment in numeracy;
- improve attainment in information and communication technology (ICT) and its use as a tool for learning across the curriculum;
- improve access, provision and attainment for the under fives; and
- improve access and provision post-16, including raising attainment at advanced level.

27. The LEA had relatively limited data when it was drawing up its original EDP but made good use of what was available in carrying out its audit of strengths and weakness. This is reflected in the priorities and action plans which take account of local needs as well as national priorities.

28. Responses in the school survey indicate a high level of satisfaction over consultation on the EDP. A high proportion of primary and secondary schools feel that the strategy for school improvement is clearly set out in the EDP and that the priorities are relevant to their own development. Visits to schools confirmed the strong support for the EDP priorities, which are often reflected in schools' own development plans.

29. The EDP benefits from being straightforward and accessible. The action plans are generally coherent. The exception is priority one which covers too wide a range of activities, including the provision of data, target-setting, school self-review, support for teaching and support for management. While all these activities are worthwhile, they do not add up to a coherent strategy to support the development of

school autonomy. Some activities supporting this priority, as well as others in the plan, are insufficiently targeted on individual schools or groups of pupils. While the EDP is appropriately reflected in other key plans, such as the corporate plan and the plans for literacy and numeracy, the EDP activities are not themselves sufficiently cross-referenced to these plans.

30. Success criteria are closely linked to the intended outcomes of the activities and most are precise and quantified. The activities are realistically costed and resources are linked to priorities.

31. The LEA is making good progress towards meeting its statutory targets for 2002. All targets for Key Stage 2 and GCSE for 2000 were met. Progress in Key Stage 2 mathematics has been particularly good and this has resulted in the LEA revising its 2002 target for the proportion of pupils obtaining Level 4 and above from 78 per cent to 81 per cent. Other targets provide an appropriate challenge to the LEA and its schools.

32. The EDP sets out responsibilities and arrangements for monitoring its implementation, including regular reports to members. Progress in implementing the EDP is satisfactory and nearly all of the activities have been carried out in line with the schedule. The exception is the priority for ICT where there has been some slippage in implementing the activities to enhance the curriculum use of ICT. Monitoring of the implementation of the EDP is sound and some evaluation of the impact of the EDP has been undertaken, but there is a lack of rigorous analysis of performance against success criteria.

### **The allocation of resources to priorities**

33. Overall, the allocation of resources to priorities is sound but there are some weaknesses in the quality and implementation of Fair Funding.

34. Every year since its establishment, the council has been faced with significant budget cuts, amounting to a cumulative total of £15m. Over the three years, it has used a total of £10m of reserves inherited from Newbury District Council and Berkshire County Council to balance its budget. Overall spending by the council has been 15 per cent above SSA in its first three financial years and has been set at 11 per cent above SSA for 2001/2002. West Berkshire has managed to maintain education spending at close to SSA, whereas the previous authority spent below SSA. However, progress in re-aligning the spending of other services with SSA has been slow. At the time of the inspection, social services was forecasted to spend 53 per cent above SSA and other services, excluding highways, at 29 per cent above SSA.

35. The council has a clear corporate capital strategy in place which links to both the council's corporate plan and the asset management plan. Education is given a high priority in the capital investment priorities.

36. The education service is making good use of its relatively limited resources. The needs of schools take priority over centrally retained funding when there are budget pressures. Resources are allocated in line with the LEA's priorities. Additional

funding has been delegated to schools for repairs and maintenance over and above the amount first allocated under Fair Funding in April 1999.

37. The education budget has been managed well: the outturn was within 0.5 per cent of the budget for 1999/2000 and a similar position is forecast for 2000/2001. However, there are considerable budget pressures, particularly in meeting the growing demands of Special Educational Needs and early years support. The 2001/2002 budget for education has been balanced within the SSA using a number of one-off measures which cannot be sustained in future years.

38. A further pressure for future years is the additional funding for the new activity led Local Management of Schools formula introduced from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2001. There has been good consultation on the new model which is widely supported. However, the LEA is only able to fund the identified needs at 80 per cent in 2001/2002 and additional resources have not been built into any budget planning over the next three years.

39. Following the recommendations of headteacher working groups, there was full consultation on Fair Funding with all headteachers and governing bodies. Amounts to be delegated and methods of delegation were scrutinised by the headteacher working group. Most schools appear to be happy with the current arrangements and there is no strong desire for more delegation of services. However, the pace and quality of the implementation of Fair Funding has been unsatisfactory because schools were not given indications of their budget allocations in time to make decisions about their choice of provider and the budgets delegated for individual services are not well aligned to the costs of provision. Schools have been offered the traded services at the same price as the budget delegated to them, but this does not give them the freedom to purchase from a supplier of their choice.

40. School budgets have been distributed to schools at the end of March in the past two years and the Section 52 budget statement, whose publication by 31<sup>st</sup> March is a statutory requirement, was not fully completed at the time of the inspection in May. Errors in the 2000/2001 Section 52 budget statement, which were not discovered until January 2001, have made some benchmarking comparisons misleading.

### **Best Value**

41. West Berkshire's Best Value performance plan received a satisfactory opinion from the district auditor. The authority has taken a strong and appropriate corporate approach to Best Value. Different ways of delivering services are being explored at a corporate level and also within the education service. The council is actively exploring the option of a strategic partnership with an external organisation as an alternative to in-house provision.

42. The education service is involved in the DfES New Models project with neighbouring LEAs and a major private sector company. Despite this, progress has been slow in the development of Best Value principles within the education service and there is little evidence, outside of the inspection and advisory service, of their being embedded in the culture of the organisation. West Berkshire does not have a

procurement strategy fully in place and schools have not been challenged by the LEA as to how they will apply best value principles.

43. No Best Value reviews pertinent to education had been completed by the start of the inspection.

## **Recommendations**

### **In order to improve the effectiveness of the EDP:**

- revise priority one to make it more coherent and increase the emphasis on developing school autonomy;
- target actions more precisely on specific groups of pupils and schools;
- cross-reference activities in the EDP to other key plans; and
- ensure a more rigorous evaluation of the EDP linked closely to the success criteria.

### **In order to improve the allocation of resources to priorities:**

- ensure that individual activities within service specifications are fully costed and the budget provision to support services to schools is clearly identified, delegating additional budget to schools where appropriate.

## **SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

### **Implications of other functions**

44. The LEA exercises the majority of its functions effectively in order to improve standards in schools. Strategic planning is very sound and collaboration with partners and other agencies is good. However, there are some weaknesses in management services, particularly those provided corporately. Provision for pupils with Special Educational Needs is good. There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in services supporting pupils' access to education.

### **Monitoring, challenge, support, intervention**

45. Overall, the LEA exercises these functions satisfactorily. The LEA's monitoring of schools and support for schools where it has concerns is effective. However, there is a lack of formal procedures for reporting to schools on their performance, other than those causing concern and insufficient challenge to their plans for improving performance.

46. Visits to schools, meetings with headteachers and governors and the school survey showed strong approval for the way in which the LEA is interpreting the Code of Practice for LEA-school relations. The LEA's role in monitoring, challenging and supporting schools is clearly set out in the EDP and its partnership document. The LEA has been successful in reaching agreement with its schools, including former grant-maintained schools, on how it exercises this role and there is a reasonable understanding in schools of what this means in practice. The work of quality managers (link advisers) and consultants is highly regarded by most schools and across all sectors, including former grant-maintained schools and special schools.

47. Monitoring of schools is thorough. The LEA makes effective use of performance data and other information to place all schools in one of five categories which are defined according to the level of concern. A range of days for monitoring and support is allocated to schools in each category, the precise allocation depending on the concerns identified. Category A schools are performing well and have no important weaknesses or issues. Over half of all schools are in this category and they are allocated a maximum of one and half days each year for monitoring and target setting. Schools are moved between categories on the basis of termly reviews conducted by a panel drawn from personnel across the council and chaired by a member of the school and governor support service. The LEA maintains good data bases of school development plan priorities and the strengths and weaknesses of each school.

48. Visits to schools confirmed that they were accurately categorised and that, with one exception, the LEA allocates support in inverse proportion to the concerns and issues facing the school. However, the allocation of a small number of extra days to schools in category B is questionable. Many of these schools are fully capable of identifying and addressing their own weaknesses, using delegated funds to purchase services from the LEA or elsewhere.

49. The LEA does not make its categorisation of schools public and this results in a lack of transparency. However, individual schools are generally clear about which category they are in and the reasons for it. Schools in categories A and B are not provided with a written statement of their allocation of centrally funded time and this results in a lack of clarity in some of these schools about their precise allocations. Several schools, including some in category C, also indicated that quality managers and other consultants are willing to make more time available to them without charge. This is not in keeping with the Code of Practice and adds to the workload of some quality managers who are already hard pressed in managing national initiatives.

50. Notes of visit by quality managers and consultants are written on the day of the visit. This is at the request of headteachers. While this has the benefit of providing an immediate summary of discussions and agreed action points, the notes sometimes lack the depth of analysis and evaluation that more reflection might provide. Notes of visit are not stored electronically and are not automatically copied to governors.

51. Schools in categories A and B are not given any written overview of the LEA's evaluation of their performance, neither are schools asked to provide any evidence of self-evaluation. The LEA keeps useful on-going reports on each school which arise from the termly review meetings. However, the written reports are not shared with headteachers nor are they invited to attend the review meetings. Too much reliance is therefore placed on oral reports from quality managers to headteachers in category A and B schools. The LEA has plans in place to provide all schools with notes from the review meetings.

52. The target-setting process has improved as the LEA has developed more sophisticated data and is likely to improve further with the use of improved pupil tracking information. The LEA provides schools with an indicative range within which to set statutory targets and negotiations with primary schools centre appropriately on the future performance of individual pupils. Targets for 2002 in the primary schools visited were challenging and realistic. Less use was made of individual pupil data to set targets in the secondary schools visited. While the plans to secure improvement were subject to rigorous challenge in the schools causing concern, there was little evidence of this happening in the other schools visited.

53. Quality managers and consultants provide effective support to schools causing concern or where there are other issues, although one pupil referral unit visited had not received sufficient support or specialist curriculum advice. Quality managers and consultants have a good knowledge of the schools and respond effectively to their needs. There were examples in several of the schools visited of quality managers helping schools to make effective use of data and supporting school self-review, for example, through joint classroom observations.

54. When the LEA was established it made the sensible decision not to attempt to maintain the breadth of curriculum support which was available under Berkshire LEA. There is a relatively slim inspection and advisory service and additional support is bought in where needed, including making use of existing expertise in its schools through teacher secondments. The LEA has recently entered into a partnership with

two other LEAs and a private company to make available high quality curriculum and other support to schools but its role in making information available to schools about alternative providers is still at a relatively early stage of development.

55. Quality managers and consultants are well led. Strategic planning is sound. The personal objectives of quality managers are linked to the corporate objectives and performance is evaluated through regular appraisal, the monitoring of written reports and informal feedback from headteachers and governors. A recently introduced electronic system is designed to improve the monitoring of quality managers' use of time. There is a sound programme of training for quality managers and consultants which caters for individual as well as generic professional development needs. The quality management service has not yet been part of a Best Value review but is taking account of Best Value principles in planning its future development. The service has the management capacity and expertise to improve further.

### **Collection and analysis of data**

56. The LEA provides schools with good performance data. Almost 90 per cent of primary and secondary schools in the survey rated the quality of data and the guidance for using it as satisfactory or better.

57. The provision and analysis of data have a secure foundation in the system of baseline assessment. Thereafter, schools are provided with a comprehensive range of value added and benchmarking data. The LEA encourages schools to track the performance of individual pupils, although this is not yet firmly embedded in all schools. The LEA is rapidly developing its own individual pupil level data to enable predictions of pupil performance to be based on prior attainment.

58. For benchmarking purposes, schools receive anonymised information on other LEA schools, neighbouring authorities and statistical neighbours. The LEA is taking part in an imaginative DfES funded 'New Ways of Working' scheme to improve the quality of data and benchmark its performance in the use of data against best practice in other LEAs. The LEA has been slow in the past to collect and use data on the performance of minority ethnic groups but this has recently improved and is now satisfactory.

59. The LEA is moving quickly to complete its programme of transferring all information electronically. The delay in making Key Stage 2 transfer information available on line in 2000 caused some irritation in schools, but agreements have now been reached with neighbouring authorities for the provision of electronic information about their pupils transferring to West Berkshire schools. Attendance records are being developed electronically to enable an analysis of attendance against attainment and other performance information.

60. Good quality training courses and support from quality managers have helped to develop schools' confidence in understanding and using data. Visits to schools revealed some variation in how effectively data are being used, but was satisfactory

overall. Many headteachers show considerable proficiency in managing data, although the administrative load on the headteachers of smaller schools is often considerable.

### **Support for literacy**

61. The LEA provides good support for literacy. Implementation of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) is well managed by a designated quality manager. The strategy manager and two consultants are knowledgeable about their subject and are effectively supported by other quality managers. The team provides expert training, advice and written guidance. The quality of support and training is highly regarded by most schools and evidence from school visits indicates that it is being effective in raising standards.

62. At the end of Key Stage 2, results in National Curriculum tests in English are above both the national average and statistical neighbours. In 2000, 80 per cent of pupils attained Level 4 or higher. This is two percentage points above the LEA target and places it on course to reach the 2002 target of 87 per cent. The LEA challenges schools that are setting targets which are too modest but the LEA's target is three per cent above the schools' aggregated target.

63. Literacy is a priority in the EDP and has an appropriate focus on raising standards of attainment in writing. EDP activities are appropriate and well targeted. The LEA's policy is to support the NLS in all schools but in the first year of the strategy 19 'core' schools received additional support. Good exit strategies, allowing schools to return for extra help if required, have reduced the number of core schools to ten, with a reduction to three expected in 2001/2. All but one of the core schools have made good progress in raising attainment. National Curriculum tests show improving performance in writing against national and statistical neighbour averages.

64. Six leading literacy teachers (LLTs) ably support the literacy team. While the training and support provided are appropriately differentiated according to need, all schools have access to open courses and these are highly praised. Schools are encouraged to work together in clusters and use the help line set up by the literacy team. Demonstration lessons by the consultants and the LLTs are a strength of the strategy. The LEA has been concerned with the specific needs of small schools and has established a small school's group that focuses specifically on planning in mixed-age classes. Special schools, teachers and staff working in early years education receive good support and effective liaison is maintained with EAL teachers.

65. Conferences have been held to brief secondary schools on the implementation of the strategy at Key Stage 3. Literacy co-ordinators have been designated in all schools to disseminate good practice in the formulation of whole school literacy strategies. Good support has been given to establishing and monitoring six summer schools. Effective steps are being taken to improve the quality of transfer information between Key Stages 2 and 3.

## **Support for numeracy**

66. The LEA has implemented the National Numeracy Strategy (NNS) effectively and is giving good support in helping to raise standards. Attainment in mathematics is rising. In 2000, the proportion of pupils achieving level 4 and above at the end of Key Stage 2 was five percentage points above the national average. The proportion of children achieving level 5 and above at the end of Key Stage 3 was eight percentage points above the national average. The LEA has twice raised its 2002 target, which now stands at 83 per cent. The EDP audit identified a wide range of achievement between pupils and between schools which is only partly explained by prior attainment.

67. The numeracy team is small but effective. A Key Stage 3 consultant has just joined the existing consultant and there are two further part time consultants. The strategy is well managed, on an interim basis, by the quality manager who also has responsibility for the literacy strategy. Eight leading mathematics teachers (LMTs) support the team, one of whom works in a special school. When first appointed, the work of the LMTs was too broadly based. The LEA has recognised this and it is now more sharply focused on problem solving and direct teaching.

68. The EDP priority is underpinned by appropriate activities, with a sensible emphasis on improving the quality of teaching. A wide range of training opportunities is provided and there is additional targeted support for ten core schools. The criteria for selecting these include low attainment and other relevant factors, such as staff turnover. Schools have received significant and regular support for planning, observation and monitoring of teaching. A scheme of accreditation for the five day course has been negotiated with a university. Good support has been given to summer schools and fostering links between a secondary school and its feeder primary school for more able mathematicians.

69. The LEA is well set to extend the NNS in secondary schools. Heads of mathematics departments are kept up to date about the strategy through local meetings and the circulation of the numeracy newsletter. A Key Stage 2 and 3 steering group has been set up and bridging units are being developed.

70. The school survey shows that training and support for numeracy is highly regarded. School visits provided evidence of effectiveness of the support. Headteachers were able to identify increased confidence and competence in teaching mathematics and rising standards. There is evidence that the spread of attainment between pupils and between schools, identified in the EDP audit, is reducing.

## **Support for information and communication technology (ICT)**

71. Support for ICT got off to a slow start in the new authority but is now satisfactory and improving. OFSTED inspection evidence indicates that pupils' progress in ICT is better in primary than secondary schools. There are considerable differences in attainment across the ten secondary schools.

72. The EDP priority to improve attainment in ICT and to use it as a tool for learning across the curriculum is appropriate. There are cross-references to literacy and numeracy and consultants in the three areas work productively together. The EDP and the ICT development plan are now being updated to ensure greater coherence, and to increase the emphasis on curriculum issues and the raising of attainment.

73. A lack of central direction in ICT in the early days of the authority resulted in schools developing a wide range of systems and networks. This lack of consistency led to significant difficulties in providing effective technical support. Consequently, the energies of the ICT consultant were initially focused on developing greater standardisation in hardware and software, rather than supporting the use of ICT for teaching and learning. The majority of schools support the harmonisation programme, although a small minority of those visited felt that it impinged upon their autonomy. A reorganisation of the ICT support structures in the authority have provided greater coherence and more effective leadership and management.

74. Support for ICT is now focused on development planning, assessment and managing ICT in the curriculum. The work of the consultant is well regarded by schools and two-thirds of secondary schools and over half the primary schools in the survey rated curriculum support for ICT as good or very good. Evidence from visits to schools supports these findings. All schools receive at least a half day visit each year and further support is negotiated in line with the National Grid for Learning (NGfL). Visits to all schools by the consultant were deemed as necessary to establish baseline information and support development planning. However, this does not make the most effective use of resources now that ICT is more firmly established.

75. Revised development plans from schools show improved planning as a result of guidance and training provided for headteachers and ICT co-ordinators. Some headteachers in the schools visited still felt insecure about monitoring the ICT curriculum. The LEA is aware of this and plans to include a new section on evaluating ICT in the next revision of its self-review document.

76. The evaluation of courses to support ICT in the curriculum and the evidence from school visits show that training is of high quality and well received. Meetings for co-ordinators are effective in disseminating information and good practice. A small training unit is now in place at the LEA's education development centre, where a curriculum network has been set up. The LEA has provided good information to schools on the New Opportunities Fund training for ICT.

77. The LEA provides effective support for its smaller primary schools through a designated small schools' ICT project, supported by 1.5 advisory teachers. Schools have the opportunity to buy into the project at different levels. They rate the support they receive from this project highly and there was evidence of its effectiveness in the schools visited.

78. The NGfL strategy is basically sound. Financial allocations are clear and there has been good consultation. A particular strength is the emphasis on ICT within the community. Although the authority has been relatively slow in extending

the curriculum use of the internet and e-mail to schools, the introduction of broadband, via the south east grid for learning, is a significant step forward in facilitating these developments. Consideration is already being given to future sustainability when NGfL funding ceases.

### **Support for schools causing concern**

79. Support for schools causing concern is good. The proportion of schools identified by OFSTED as causing concern is well below the national average. The LEA inherited only one primary school with serious weaknesses and none requiring special measures. Since the LEA came into existence, only a pupil referral unit (PRU) has required special measures and one primary school has been identified as having serious weaknesses. The most recent monitoring visit by OFSTED to the PRU judged it as making good progress and it has now been removed from special measures, well within the two year deadline. Both primary schools identified as having serious weaknesses have also made very good progress and been removed from this category. LEA support has been effective in securing the progress of the PRU and the primary schools with serious weaknesses.

80. The LEA makes effective use of data and other knowledge of its schools to identify concerns at an early stage and to take appropriate actions to remedy them. Project teams to support schools in difficulty are drawn from officers across the service and co-ordinated by the quality managers. Two quality managers are allocated to each school causing concern, one to co-ordinate and provide support and the other to monitor progress. This is good practice. Senior officers regularly review progress and propose further action where necessary. Schools are moved up the categories of support as they improve, providing an effective exit strategy.

81. Visits to schools where the LEA had identified concerns confirm that the support is good and that the schools are making sound progress. Quality managers and the school and governor support team provide good support to headteachers and governors to improve management and develop the capacity for self-evaluation. Consultants provide intensive support for particular areas of the curriculum. The personnel service provides effective support on matters of staff competency and governors are supported in replacing headteachers and other staff where necessary. The LEA has helped strengthen governing bodies through the appointment of additional governors.

### **Support for governors**

82. Support for school governors is good.

83. The school and governor support team has clear aims which focus on recruitment and retention, induction of new governors and matching training to governors' needs. These aims are clearly reflected in practice and are underpinned by good communication systems. There is a detailed and informative termly newsletter and a help desk that is well used by governors and clerks to governing bodies. There are regular chairs' briefings, clerks' briefings and meetings of link development governors. A governor services review group and a governors' forum also meet termly to provide feedback on the quality of centrally provided services

and to advise on further corporate developments. Governors value these two-way communication systems and feel that they reflect the clear commitment of the LEA to working in partnership with its schools.

84. A vigorous recruitment drive, targeted particularly at newly elected councillors, local business people and retiring parent governors, has ensured that most governing bodies have full membership, and there are relatively few vacancies.

85. The school and governor support team arranges an extensive training programme that focuses appropriately on both national and local issues of concern to governors. A flexible system of timing and location of training sessions has been established to increase attendance, but this remains variable. Training needs are identified through termly consultation meetings with link development governors, who also provide feedback on the quality of advice and training. Experienced governors contribute to the training programme. Training is generally well received. Some governors of secondary schools find cross-phase training of limited value. The LEA has provided courses specifically designed for secondary governors but these have tended to be poorly attended.

86. As well as centralised courses, the LEA provides in-school training for whole governing bodies. This has been well received. Recent training has focused on supporting governing bodies to develop strategies for self-review. The impact of this on schools varies. Some governing bodies are well equipped to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their schools: they analyse results and are closely involved in the target setting process. In others, governors take little active part in setting standards and monitoring performance.

### **Support for school management**

87. The LEA provides satisfactory support for school management by carefully targeting its own contribution and making realistic and often effective use of other providers. Nearly two thirds of primary schools and over half the secondary schools rated support for management to be good or very good in the school survey. Evidence from those schools that have been inspected twice by OFSTED shows an improvement in management and efficiency which compares favourably with similar LEAs and national figures. Visits to schools found support to management to be satisfactory overall.

88. Supporting school management is an activity within priority one of the EDP. The main objective is to enable senior managers to take responsibility for standards within the context of autonomous schools. However, this does not in itself add up to a coherent strategy for developing management and leadership across the authority.

89. A limited number of courses is offered directly by the LEA to support managers. A range of partnerships is being established with other LEAs, higher education and the private sector. The LEA maintains a database of training courses and providers and makes this available to schools, but some headteachers would like to see this developed further. The LEA encourages senior managers to participate in the leadership programme for serving headteachers (LPSH) and the national programme for headship (NPQH) and take-up is good. An effective

induction and mentorship programme is offered to newly appointed headteachers. The LEA is developing appropriate programmes to enable middle managers to undertake leadership roles, including secondments and the teacher consultant scheme.

90. The LEA has introduced useful self-evaluation guidance for primary and secondary schools which is supported by training. The guidance has been well received in primary schools where there is evidence of it starting to have an impact, although developments are often at an early stage. The guidance has had less impact in secondary schools. Some headteachers feel that the guidance is not tailored specifically enough to the needs of secondary schools. The LEA is aware of this and important additions to the next edition will include advice on monitoring ICT and post-16 provision.

91. A number of schools are facing difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers, including supply staff. Current vacancies are no higher than nationally, but headteachers are concerned about the quality of the applicants at all levels and the prospects for recruitment in the future. LEA initiatives have focused on attracting newly qualified teachers (NQTs) through marketing at recruitment fairs and by collaborating with a university on the graduate teacher programme. A well regarded and effective induction programme for NQTs is in place. Unfortunately, many new teachers leave the area after a few years because of the high cost of housing. The LEA has started to offer a limited amount of housing support but recognises that more needs to be done if teachers are to be attracted to and retained in the authority.

## **Recommendations**

### **In order to improve monitoring, challenge, intervention and support:**

- make the categorisation of schools and the allocation of centrally funded support more transparent;
- ensure all schools are provided with a clear, considered written evaluation of their performance, using school self evaluation as appropriate;
- copy notes of visit and evaluation reports to governors; and
- provide a more rigorous challenge to schools through a better and more consistent evaluation of their plans for improvement.

## **SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT**

### **Corporate planning**

92. There is a sound framework of corporate planning. The corporate plan both reflects and drives the priorities for education. The service plan for education sets the priorities for the service units, which in turn establish individual targets and training plans. The corporate scheme for performance management is well established in education. The current corporate plan was constructed at a very early stage in the council's development and is now due for revision. The intention is to involve services more fully in this revision than was possible in the original version.

93. There is a strong commitment to education in the council. The director of children and young people's services is one of five corporate directors. Education is fully represented in corporate decision making and takes a lead role in a number of cross-cutting council initiatives. There is cross-party agreement on the main priorities for education, which have been pursued consistently since the LEA was established. The chief executive has a detailed understanding of national and local education issues and is closely involved in developments in the LEA.

94. Few members in West Berkshire had previous experience of education committee work under Berkshire county council and this has meant a steep learning curve for many. Nevertheless, lead members and education spokespersons of both political parties show a good grasp of the key educational issues and provide sound leadership. They make timely and appropriate decisions. There is a clear scheme of delegation to officers and members do not interfere unduly in the management of services. Most members of the former education committee are governors and take a keen interest in the progress of individual schools. The scrutiny role of members is exercised through the standards and effectiveness panel and through the recently established select committee for children and young people. Headteachers and chairs of governing bodies are invited to standards and effectiveness panel meetings to discuss progress following OFSTED inspections and other school development issues. The meetings also provide the opportunity for headteachers and governors to provide feedback on the quality of LEA services. Members, headteachers and governors find these meetings mutually useful and productive. However, members' scrutiny role in challenging the performance of the service is still relatively undeveloped.

95. The acting director and senior officers provide very sound leadership. They have the confidence of members and schools. Relationships with all types of school, including former grant-maintained schools, and with the professional associations, are good. Schools feel there is meaningful consultation and dialogue on key issues and areas of policy development. There is a genuine attempt to involve schools in decision making, for example through the education management advisory board (EMAB), through regular meetings with governors and involving headteachers in key officer appointments. Senior officers attempt to visit all schools at least once a year to discuss key issues and to obtain feedback on the quality of support. Officers have a good understanding of schools and are quick to respond to crises. Officers provide elected members with good and timely advice, useful guidance and summaries of progress on key initiatives.

96. The key objectives for the LEA when it was first established were to obtain the confidence of schools and to make a smooth transition from a large county to a small unitary authority. The LEA has been successful in achieving these objectives. There is little nostalgia for the old authority, although some schools lament the loss of the range of support they received from Berkshire. The LEA sensibly chose not to attempt to provide the range of services available under Berkshire LEA. It has successfully capitalised on the benefits of being a small authority: its close relationship with schools, good communications and speed of response are examples of this.

97. The LEA has also sought to minimise some of the disadvantages of being small through working in partnership with other LEAs and private contractors, through the use of consultants and through buying in services from outside the authority. The LEA has been bold in putting out services to tender. The LEA now needs to clarify its longer term role as a small LEA and decide which services it is going to provide itself, which it is going to broker and which it is not going to provide. The wide range of schools requires flexibility in the LEA's response. Headteachers and governors in the many small schools have little appetite for increased delegation or for seeking alternative providers. In contrast, headteachers of some of the large secondary schools would like to see maximum delegation and flexibility of service providers.

98. A key challenge for the LEA is meeting the needs of the high proportion of primary schools it has with fewer than 100 pupils. Members are committed to keeping these schools open as a key component in maintaining village communities. There are clustering arrangements for primary schools and small schools are given enhanced funding through the LMS formula. A quality manager has responsibility for small schools and the LEA has supported a range of useful initiatives to enhance the work of small schools. These include the small schools ICT initiative and joint work between small schools and secondary schools. While the LEA has a policy on supporting small schools, there is yet no overall strategy which brings the various initiatives together in a coherent plan.

### **Partnership**

99. The LEA has been successful in establishing good relationships with a range of partners. It adopts a multi-agency approach to education and lifelong learning. This is reflected in its close collaboration with local pre-schools, the council for voluntary services and the education business partnership. Relationships between the education and social services departments are sound at the strategic level, although there are sometimes weaknesses at the operational level. The establishment of the children and young people service grouping is intended to tackle these weaknesses.

100. There is a sound structure for writing and implementing statutory plans which ensures that all relevant bodies are consulted at each stage of the process. Although led by the education service, these are truly multi-disciplinary exercises.

101. Officers are receptive to new approaches, for example to tackling crime and other social issues. They have provided considerable support for the local police in piloting a project on restorative justice and have collaborated with them in developing strategies for combating truancy. The LEA also works closely with the youth offending team and drugs action team whose representatives welcome the appropriate balance of support and leadership which officers provide.

102. Very effective relationships have been established with the local dioceses. Diocesan officers are closely consulted on matters relating to voluntary aided and controlled schools and the LEA responds rapidly to any issues raised. Diocesan representatives are involved in review meetings to discuss individual schools and are included in the project support groups of any voluntary aided schools causing concern. The education committee welcomes church involvement, but there are concerns that their role in policy development will be substantially reduced under the proposed modernised local government structure. There is good co-operation between the LEA and the dioceses in relation to the standing advisory council for religious education (SACRE). However, roles and responsibilities for implementing the work of the SACRE need to be more clearly defined if it is to have an effective impact on schools.

### **Management services**

103. Management support services are satisfactory overall but there are weaknesses in some aspects of the provision.

104. The LEA was late in producing detailed services information on offer to schools. The information was sent out to schools during April 2000, giving a return date of early May 2000 for schools to sign up for the services they required. The booklet of services on offer to schools presented at the time of the inspection did not detail the price of the service or the method of calculating the price for the service. Service specifications offer limited choice for schools, packages lack differentiation and there is some confusion between statutory and traded services. The LEA agreed with schools to offer a simple buy-back arrangement for the first two years of Fair Funding and, as a result, buy-back is high. Officers recognise the current limitations in service specifications and are working towards offering a more menu-based approach for April 2002. However, the LEA has been slow to start this detailed piece of work. Financial and personnel services are currently provided corporately but will be decentralised to the new children and young people service grouping once it is established.

105. **Financial services for schools** are unsatisfactory. Staff vacancies and the inability to recruit staff have to some extent impeded the efficiency of services, although the council has employed external consultants to undertake necessary work to keep up with the demands of Fair Funding. Finance staff time is not always targeted appropriately with too much time spent administering school bank accounts.

106. Relatively few schools have budget deficits and the LEA has secure recovery plans in place where necessary. However, aggregate budget surpluses in primary schools are too high and the LEA has been slow to challenge schools holding significant balances.

107. Schools rated the individual support from financial services as generally satisfactory in the school survey. Payroll and internal audit for schools are sound. The council's internal audit service as a whole has suffered from high staff vacancies, resulting in the overall corporate audit plan for 2000/2001 being only 75 per cent completed, although school audits have been fully completed.

108. **The personnel service** provides good casework and professional support but there are weaknesses in support for personnel administration, particularly with regard to contracts. The personnel team acknowledges these weaknesses and is piloting schools taking over the contract issuing function. However, there is currently no intention to offer any additional funding to schools to take over contract administration, which is identified as a traded service in the SLA. The service is bought back by 95 per cent of schools, reflecting previous inadequate delegation where activities within personnel were not matched to budget provision.

109. **ICT administration** is provided by a local support team working within the libraries, information and communication service unit. The service provides good support. However, the budget retained centrally by the LEA for the delivery of the service is high and offers schools insufficient flexibility in their spending decisions. The LEA has made good progress in working in partnership with schools to ensure a data rich management information system and good electronic data transfer between schools and LEA. Pilot projects have demonstrated that the LEA is in a good position to undertake the pupil level annual census data return for January 2002 for all schools.

110. **Property services** has some strengths but also some important weaknesses. School buildings are given a high priority within the council's capital strategy and planned school investment is clearly documented. West Berkshire has undertaken its responsibilities on asset management planning satisfactorily. This is confirmed by the recent DfES assessment of progress made to date on the LEA's asset management plan (AMP). The AMP clearly sets out the different sources of funding available to improve the condition of school buildings. However, the LEA has only limited systems in place for tracking schools' intended deployment of delegated capital funding.

111. Schools are rightly critical of the LEA's role in exercising its landlord responsibilities and in undertaking building maintenance. The council's housing and property services team has been slow in appreciating the need to provide a customer focused service to autonomous schools. Headteachers have not always been consulted on the timing and duration of work to be undertaken at their schools. Although dissatisfaction with the service has been communicated to the LEA for over a year, the school survey identified only a marginal improvement in schools' perception of the quality of the service.

112. **The catering and cleaning** client support service is generally satisfactory, but the delivery of the corporately arranged services was judged as less than satisfactory by 43 per cent of schools for cleaning and 31 per cent for catering in the school survey.

113. **School transport** is satisfactory. Costs are high when compared to the national average, owing partly to the rural nature of the area and partly to the way the service is scheduled. Consultants employed by the LEA have identified costs savings in both the home to school transport and special needs transport budgets. The full savings will be achieved in three years after implementation costs have been incurred. Schools rated the quality of the service as satisfactory in the survey.

## **Recommendations**

### **In order to improve corporate planning:**

- develop with schools a clear view of the LEA's longer term role in providing and brokering support; and
- put in place a coherent strategy for supporting small schools.

### **In order to improve management services:**

- provide revised service specifications to schools in sufficient time to allow them to make informed decisions on future buyback of LEA services;
- accelerate the decentralisation of the finance and personnel services to ensure schools receive the responsive and focused service they require; and
- tackle problems in the delivery of building maintenance, school meals and cleaning in consultation with schools.

## **SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION**

### **Strategy**

114. The LEA has a good strategy for Special Educational Needs. The strategy is based on a rigorous audit of need, undertaken as part of a comprehensive review of SEN policy and practice when the authority was first established. This was completed within the planned timescale and led to an agreed policy which is committed to inclusion and reflects the Government's Programme of Action. The policy is underpinned by a coherent and ambitious three year development plan, which began in March 2000. The strategy for inclusion is sensible, building incrementally on existing practice and ensuring developments are secure before moving on. It also sets appropriate longer term goals which are well paced over a demanding timescale.

115. The SEN review involved extensive consultation and co-operative working with a range of partners. This is reflected in the wide ownership of the policy and the confidence schools have in the LEA's commitment to respond to their views. Parents, special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) and headteachers all rate the LEA highly in terms of responsiveness and consultation on SEN.

116. The plan supports a number of related but discrete activities which are monitored and evaluated through a network of management groups and quality assurance systems, including a rigorous performance management framework. The LEA has made good progress in implementing the strategy. However, communication with schools about the implementation of the strategy has been less effective than when it was first being developed. Progress is reported annually to members but this does not provide a full evaluation of activities against success criteria. It is a statement of achievements, rather than an analysis of performance. Specific initiatives, such as the inclusion project, have more rigorous reporting arrangements.

117. There are a number of activities in the development plan intended to extend and enrich the LEA's provision for SEN. These are appropriately rooted in enhancing the role of its two successful special schools in promoting inclusion through the co-location of premises and outreach services. A number of special school pupils have successfully transferred to mainstream schools, following a period of part time attendance in the mainstream schools. Although still in its early stages, the LEA has made good progress in implementing inclusion. There are currently ten per cent fewer pupils in special schools than in 1998. In order to fill some inherited gaps in the LEA's provision, appropriate steps are being taken to meet the needs of pupils with severe learning difficulties, autism and visual impairments within the LEA's own special schools.

### **Statutory obligations**

118. The LEA meets its statutory obligations effectively. Over 98 per cent of statutory assessments are completed within the 18 week timescale, compared to 54 per cent in 1998. The LEA has clear and comprehensive criteria for initiating a statutory assessment. Statements scrutinised during the inspection were of good

quality, with clear, detailed descriptions of pupils' needs and the provision required. Officers attend annual review meetings where necessary and their input is valued. The LEA monitors the quality and outcomes of reviews.

119. The LEA maintains a comparatively high number of statements of SEN. It is committed to reducing this and is taking appropriate action through earlier intervention and a more rigorous approach to statutory annual reviews. There is evidence that these actions are beginning to have a positive impact. However, the LEA has not set precise targets for reducing the number of statements.

120. The parent partnership service has recently been strengthened by the appointment of a co-ordinator. The service's existence and purpose are not yet well enough known by parents, and to date there has been little direct work with families. The recently produced draft policies, procedures and plans for the service are satisfactory.

### **Improvement and value for money**

121. The LEA provides very sound support for school improvement with regard to SEN. Positive contributions are provided by the SEN support team, the behaviour support service and the sensory consortium. Educational psychology support is also generally well received but the quantity and continuity of support cause some concerns. SEN support services are well managed, with clear performance targets, and effectively communicated approaches to inclusion and school improvement. They play a valuable role in developing schools' expertise and confidence through individually tailored training and consultancy. There are good systems in place for measuring the effectiveness of services, including benchmarking costs against other LEAs. The increasing use of special school staff to share expertise through outreach work is rated highly by participating schools.

122. Target-setting for pupils who have special educational needs is based largely on individual education plans (IEPs) and the results of statutory testing. This approach does not enable the LEA to set more sophisticated cohort targets or compare the progress of pupils with similar needs in different settings. Special schools are just beginning to use P-scales.

123. Planned centrally retained expenditure on special educational needs is lower than the unitary authority average. The LEA delegates a higher than average amount of funding to schools for pupils with statements. It also retains a reserve for new statements to be issued during the year. Spending on placing pupils in special schools in other LEAs is relatively high and placements in some schools do not always represent good value for money.

124. While overall expenditure on SEN in 2000/2001 was within budget, expenditure on statemented pupils was over budget by £167,000. The LEA has analysed the reasons for this and put in place further financial controls. However, these will meet only a proportion of the overspend, which is largely the result of costs associated with increased inclusion and better quality services. The LEA has recognised this by increasing the budget in this area for 2001/2002.

125. Non statutory funding is allocated according to a broadly satisfactory formula which includes educational and social factors. There are plans to replace this with a system that more closely matches the needs of individual pupil.

**In order to improve special educational provision:**

- develop a more rigorous approach to target-setting for pupils who have special educational needs;
- improve budget forecasting, monitoring and control; and
- reduce the commitment to placements in other LEAs where they do not represent good value for money.

## **SECTION 5: ACCESS**

### **The supply of school places**

126. The LEA's planning of school places is generally satisfactory, although the LEA has work to do to ensure there are sufficient secondary places in the future. The accuracy of pupil number forecasting has improved and is satisfactory, apart from forecasts for post-16 education. Problems with external forecasting software and data and have made it difficult to produce plans on time.

127. West Berkshire is providing sound leadership and effective partnership working in the resolution of surplus school places. In 1999, two small secondary schools were closed and replaced by a new secondary school, reducing the aggregate secondary surplus places to 3.6 per cent. However, sufficiency of secondary places in future years is now an issue for the LEA. There are relatively few surplus places in secondary schools and half the schools are over capacity. The secondary schools are popular and attract a considerable number of pupils living outside the authority. Although the school organisation plan for 2001-2006 forecasts over-capacity in the secondary sector in five out of the six sub areas in West Berkshire, it does little more than suggest annual monitoring as a solution and is unsatisfactory in this respect.

128. Primary school surplus places within West Berkshire are largely a consequence of the high number of rural schools. There are twenty two schools with less than a hundred statutory aged pupils. West Berkshire is committed to supporting small schools and its policy for ensuring their viability is clearly set out in the school organisation plan. Additional surplus places have also been created as a result of the introduction of the infant class sizes plan. There were nine per cent surplus places overall in 1999/2000, which is not excessive. In January 2001, sixteen schools had more than 25 per cent surplus places, but four of these have less than 30 pupils. The LEA is managing the situation satisfactorily. The school organisational plan has been shared with all appropriate stakeholders, meets statutory requirements and links well to other plans.

### **Admissions**

129. Admission arrangements in West Berkshire are very good. Information provided to parents is comprehensive, transparent and understandable and conforms to the admissions code of practice. The booklet providing guidance to parents on admissions is an example of good practice

130. Admissions criteria are clear, unambiguous, fair and reasonable. The LEA is working effectively with schools to ensure a consistent approach to admissions throughout all West Berkshire schools. As a result of consultation with schools, the LEA is centralising the primary admission arrangements from September 2001

131. Parents' first school preference was met in 92 per cent of cases and no appeals have been lodged during the current round of admissions for secondary transfer.

132. The LEA is working in partnership with neighbouring LEAs and a major private sector company as part of the DfES New Models project. Admissions is identified as an area that may benefit from regional collaboration and the LEA is taking a lead role in this element of the project.

### **Promoting social inclusion**

133. Promoting social inclusion is not a specific priority in the EDP but, given the context of West Berkshire, it is accorded sufficient prominence in activities supporting other EDP priorities. Overall provision is a balance of strengths and weaknesses.

134. The key performance indicators show a position of strength: attendance is good; truancy is rare; numbers of permanent exclusions are low and reducing. There are also examples of good practice in the monitoring of pupils educated otherwise than at school, the support for children in public care and the support for pupils with behavioural difficulties. However, there are some weaknesses in service provision: two of the pupil referral units (PRUs) have experienced difficulties; support for attendance by the education welfare service is not well targeted and the implementation of anti racism strategies has been slow. The LEA is aware of these weaknesses and appropriate plans are in place to make the necessary improvements.

### **Provision of education otherwise than at school**

135. Support for children educated otherwise than at school is satisfactory overall, but there are some weaknesses in the provision. The LEA has rigorous and very thorough tracking and monitoring systems for the great majority of pupils who are educated otherwise than at school through its multi-disciplinary, pupils at risk panels. This process is designed to ensure that no children 'slip through the net'. Guidance to schools and home educators is good and includes procedures for disapplying pupils from parts of the national curriculum.

136. The LEA maintains three very small PRUs: one for primary aged pupils and two for secondary aged pupils, one of which accommodates a social inclusion programme. The provision is mainly part-time and, in this respect, is unsatisfactory. One of the secondary PRUs has, until very recently, been subject to special measures and the primary unit has suffered from the lack of a teacher-in-charge between September 2000 and May 2001. No new admissions have taken place during that period and the four existing pupils have remained in receipt of part-time provision, supplemented by home tuition, for the whole of their last primary school year. Curriculum advice in the primary PRU has also been limited. The LEA has comprehensive and ambitious plans to improve its PRU provision but these are dependent on the establishment of another PRU in the east of the authority. Funding has been made available for this but the LEA has not yet been able to identify suitable accommodation.

## **Attendance**

137. Overall, levels of pupil attendance in schools are high and levels of unauthorised absence are low, comparing favourably with similar authorities and nationally. Pupil attendance is above 90 per cent in all secondary schools and truancy is rare. School inspection reports judge attendance as good in the nine secondary schools inspected since 1996, and good in three-quarters of primary schools, and never less than satisfactory, over the same period. However, support for improving pupils' attendance at school has weaknesses, and levels of unauthorised absence are not falling quickly enough in four secondary schools to meet agreed targets.

138. The education welfare service, whose main priority is to support improvement in attendance, is not sufficiently well targeted on need. The automatic, half-termly visits to many, often small, primary schools are unnecessary to fulfil the LEA's core function. Plans are now in place to devolve part of the service to schools in order to target support more effectively at those secondary schools where reductions in unauthorised absence are proving difficult to achieve.

139. In fulfilling its strategic functions, the education welfare service has adopted a number of sensible strategies, including truancy sweeps with the police, to continue to support further improvement in attendance rates. Nevertheless, despite cross-boundary protocols with neighbouring authorities, the LEA has not been sufficiently diligent in monitoring the attendance of its pupils placed in EBD special schools in other LEAs. These pupils remain the responsibility of West Berkshire. The LEA was not aware of the very poor attendance of some of these pupils. When this was brought to the attention of the LEA during the inspection, there was an immediate and well thought out response which should quickly resolve this situation.

## **Behaviour support**

140. Support for improving behaviour in schools is sound. The LEA produced a satisfactory behaviour support plan in February 1999 and this has recently been reviewed. Reasonable progress has been made in implementing the plan, although some objectives have only been partly achieved, and some only very recently. Action planning tends to focus on measuring levels of activity rather than outcomes in terms of improvements in behaviour. School inspection reports judge the behaviour of pupils in schools to be good in the vast majority of schools and never less than satisfactory. This compares favourably with similar authorities and nationally.

141. The rate of permanent exclusions in primary schools is too low to be statistically significant. The numbers of permanent exclusions from secondary schools halved in 1999-2000 to 12, far exceeding the LEA's targeted reduction, and although numbers have risen modestly this year, the LEA is on course to reach its challenging statutory target for 2002. No independent appeals have been successful. However, the rate of fixed term exclusions in secondary schools is rising. The LEA maintains high quality data on exclusions and systems for tracking excluded pupils are good.

142. The LEA's behaviour support team of three part-time teachers offers a sensible balance of support to teachers and pupils in primary schools. In secondary schools, money is delegated to schools to release a senior member of the school's teaching staff for half a day each week to develop strategies, often with other agencies, for improving pupils' behaviour. This reflects the LEA's overall strategy of promoting school autonomy. This is a successful scheme: ownership for improving behaviour remains with the schools; good practice is shared effectively; support from psychological and welfare staff is deployed rationally and early intervention at primary/secondary transition helps prevent problems at a later stage. In an area where poor pupil behaviour is rare, the LEA has struck an appropriate balance of centrally held and delegated support. However, the LEA's evaluation of the effectiveness of its overall investment in behaviour support is weak.

### **Health, safety, welfare, child protection**

143. There are sound and thorough child protection procedures in place in schools and, based on an analysis of documentation provided, appropriate systems are in place to ensure the health, safety and welfare of pupils. Most designated teachers for child protection have received good quality training and the LEA makes an appropriate contribution to the area child protection committee. Attempts to improve relationships between schools and social services through presentations at headteachers' meetings and through allocating named social workers to schools, have only been partly implemented. Relationships between schools and social services vary and are too dependent upon the individuals concerned. The point at which social services intervene on behalf of individual children is not always clear to teachers, and there is no rigorously implemented system of feedback on specific cases.

### **Children in public care**

144. Support for improving the education of children in public care is good. The LEA has taken its role very seriously for the 83 children for whom the council has full parental responsibility. It knows where its children are; what their academic attainments are; whether they are excluded or truant and what happens to them when they leave school. This knowledge is the outcome of sound policy development at an early stage, good strategic and information links with the social services department, and clear allocation of responsibilities to designated teachers and governors, who are offered appropriate training. The council also fulfils its role as parent advocate in terms of practical matters such as admissions and transport, and protectively for those with special educational needs or who are excluded. Not all children in public care have a personal education plan but measures are in place to achieve this by September 2001.

### **Support for minority ethnic children**

145. The authority made a slow start in developing a strategy for supporting pupils of minority ethnic heritage, especially in the collection of achievement data. There was scant reference to their needs in the EDP. However, this is strengthened in the revised EDP through a detailed analysis of the attainment of minority ethnic pupils, and a carefully drafted partnership agreement between equality services and schools

which clarifies both strategy and provision. The LEA now provides effectively for these pupils. Numbers are small and widely dispersed and most pupils of minority ethnic heritage achieve above the authority's average level of attainment.

146. The service to support minority ethnic children is purchased from Reading LEA. There is good liaison between the equality services team and LEA staff. Support includes English as an additional language (EAL), training and access to a bank of resources. Aggregate and individual pupil targets are now set and attainment is closely monitored. The service is well regarded by those schools that use it. Although there are no refugee or asylum children in West Berkshire, a strategy is in place to support any arrivals.

147. The small number of Traveller children is well supported by a consortium managed by Wokingham LEA and covering the six ex-Berkshire authorities. Schools commented favourably on the speed of response of the service, and the range of resource materials it is able to provide. There is good support for gypsy and fairground children. Effective liaison and protocols have now been established between the dedicated Travellers' education welfare service and that of the LEA.

### **Support for gifted and talented pupils**

148. There is some effective provision for able pupils in individual schools and groups of schools within the authority. However, overall provision is underdeveloped and is not co-ordinated sufficiently by the LEA. Strategies adopted by individual schools include: grouping pupils according to ability; setting high individual targets for the most able pupils; and providing additional tuition after school. In some cases, primary and secondary schools have worked together on cross phase projects in ICT and mathematics. Schools have also been involved in master classes, workshops and summer schools. While able pupils have been involved in such projects, the main focus, in most cases, has been on enhancing opportunities for pupils across the ability range. The LEA has supported such projects and has disseminated information across schools but, in most of the schools visited, headteachers were unaware of an overall authority-wide strategy to support more able pupils. To develop work in this area further, the LEA has established a working group with representatives from all phases and has recently produced guidance materials for schools and a policy for able pupils. However, it is too early to judge the impact of these most recent developments.

### **Measures to combat racism**

149. The corporate and departmental response to the recommendations of the report of the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence has been sound in principle but slow in practice. The council's expressed view in April 2000 that 'words are not enough', and the vision and values must be backed up by action, has not been translated into practice in the LEA and its schools. The recording of racial incidents is not consistent in schools and not reported systematically to the LEA and governors, despite these issues being identified as weaknesses a year ago. It was only during the period of the inspection that the LEA strategy was being launched, more than two years after the Macpherson Report was published.

## **Recommendations**

### **In order to promote social inclusion:**

- implement plans to increase to full-time the provision for children educated otherwise than at school, particularly those on the rolls of pupil referral units; and
- target the deployment of education welfare resources at those most in need, particularly those in secondary schools which are failing to meet targets for reducing unauthorised absence, and urgently on those pupils in placements outside the LEA whose attendance is poor.

## **APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **In order to improve the effectiveness of the EDP:**

- revise priority one to make it more coherent and increase the emphasis on developing school autonomy;
- target actions more precisely on specific groups of pupils and schools;
- cross-reference activities in the EDP to other key plans;
- ensure a more rigorous evaluation of the EDP linked closely to the success criteria.

### **In order to improve the allocation of resources to priorities:**

- ensure that individual activities within service specifications are fully costed and the budget provision to support services to schools is clearly identified, delegating additional budget to schools where appropriate.

### **In order to improve monitoring, challenge, intervention and support:**

- make the categorisation of schools and the allocation of centrally funded support more transparent;
- ensure all schools are provided with a clear, considered written evaluation of their performance, using school self evaluation as appropriate;
- copy notes of visit and evaluation reports to governors; and
- provide a more rigorous challenge to schools through a better and more consistent evaluation of their plans for improvement.

### **In order to improve corporate planning:**

- develop with schools a clear view of the LEA's longer term role in providing and brokering support; and
- put in place a coherent strategy for supporting small schools.

### **In order to improve management services:**

- provide revised service specifications to schools in sufficient time to allow them to make informed decisions on future buyback of LEA services;
- accelerate the decentralisation of the finance and personnel services to ensure schools receive the responsive and focused service they require; and
- tackle problems in the delivery of building maintenance, school meals and cleaning in consultation with schools.

### **In order to improve special educational provision:**

- develop a more rigorous approach to target-setting for pupils who have special educational needs;
- improve budget forecasting, monitoring and control; and

- reduce the commitment to placements in other LEAs where they do not represent good value for money.

**In order to promote social inclusion:**

- implement plans to increase to full-time the provision for children educated otherwise than at school, particularly those on the rolls of pupil referral units.
- target the deployment of education welfare resources at those most in need, particularly those in secondary schools which are failing to meet targets for reducing unauthorised absence, and urgently on those pupils in placements outside the LEA whose attendance is poor.

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

**Tel: 0207 421 6800**

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