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Local Government Association



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE



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Executive summary

Introduction

This chapter summarises the key findings from a literature review concerning the ways in which national and local government work together to raise school standards. The review was one outcome of a more general evaluation of the implementation of seven national–local shared priorities for the public services, directed by Howard Davis of the Local Government Centre at the University of Warwick.

The aim of the review, carried out by a team at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) between March 2004 and February 2005, was to provide an up-to-date picture of the context within which the educational priority was being implemented. Subsidiary aims were to:

- identify the main roles that national government and local education authorities (LEAs) take in relation to raising school standards
- consider what the literature says about the relative importance and effectiveness of these various roles
- examine what the literature reveals about the nature and effectiveness of national–local partnership working
- develop a series of signposts relating to the raising standards literature.

A three-stage methodology was used to conduct the literature review. This involved searching the relevant databases and identifying relevant documentation, analysis of these documents, and synthesising the document reviews in order to signpost key documents relating to the LEA role in raising standards in all schools.

Key findings

The national government context

The general thrust of the documents relating to the role of national government in relation to raising standards is

one of a strengthening of the central policy framework. The overarching framework includes the Ofsted inspection system (which has become ‘lighter touch’ recently), the National Curriculum, testing and ‘league tables’, workforce remodelling, increased regulation of teacher training, the introduction of school-improvement targets, and the numeracy, literacy and key stage 3 strategies. The expansion of the numbers of Specialist Schools is one way in which school autonomy has been increased. Most of this, arguably, has involved increased centralisation, and a greater role for the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and other national agencies, sometimes at the expense of LEAs.

The encouragement of partnership working, however, has often acted as a stimulus that has, at times, enabled LEAs and schools to work together. This has included initiatives such as Excellence in Cities, the Leading Edge Partnership Programme and the New Relationship with Schools. The latter was introduced in September 2004 in eight trial LEAs and over 90 schools from both secondary and primary sectors. In most cases it is probably true to say that the DfES-promoted initiative has stimulated partnership working between schools and schools, and between schools and LEAs, rather than directly between central and local government.

The local government context

A review of the literature relating to LEA roles, especially in relation to central government, revealed that the policy framework set in motion by the Education Reform Act (GB, Statutes, 1988) and built upon in subsequent legislation has not significantly changed in character to the present day. However, the combination of increased central government control over education and the increased autonomy of schools has significantly reduced the scale and scope of LEA activities over the last 15 years or so. Specifically, within the process of centralisation, LEAs have lost:

- the entire post-compulsory sector
- their monopoly position as suppliers of educational services and training

- their role in inspection
- in some cases (for example city academies) any role in schools at all.

The current framework for LEA involvement in school improvement is influenced by the following legislation and ministerial directives:

- 1998 School Standards and Framework Act
- Code of Practice of LEA–school relations
- Speech by Secretary of State to the Association of Chief Education Officers (ACEO) conference in 2003
- 2003 DfES/LGA statement on compacts
- The ‘single conversation’ and ‘new relationship’ with schools (2004)
- The new five year plan for education, launched in July 2004.

Constraints on local education authorities

Although LEAs have played, and continue to play, an important role in school improvement, they are not free to do as they please. There are many constraints both on the scope and type of actions that LEAs can initiate in pursuit of school improvement. These can be summarised as follows.

Funding

Under the Fair Funding requirements, as set out in the 1998 Standards and Framework Act, LEAs are permitted to retain central funding to support their role in specific areas, including school improvement. However, LEAs have been encouraged to keep this central funding to a minimum. The green paper *Modernising Local Government Finance* (DTLR, 2000) proposed that LEAs should be made to delegate at least 90 per cent of funds to schools. This has not been achieved yet, but there is pressure on LEAs to work towards this. In addition, Ofsted now inspects LEAs, and in their LEA Framework for Inspection (2000) one of the main questions they have to answer is: does the LEA manage its functions efficiently and economically? Whilst it may be good for schools to have control over a larger budget, this process limits the scope of LEA action to deliver school improvement strategies, as reduced

funding for the centre means reduced capacity at the centre. Despite this reduction in centrally held budgets and pressure to open up the market in educational services, many schools still have high expectations of the level of service to be provided by their LEA.

Human resources

There also appears to be a significant problem for LEAs in terms of the human resources available for school-improvement work. A series of surveys of LEA advisory and inspection services by the NFER’s Educational Management and Information Exchange (EMIE) has charted the decline in numbers of LEA inspectors and advisers and advisory teachers through the 1990s (Arnold, 2002; Dean, 1993, 1994; HENDY, 1998; Mann, 1995). There is evidence that LEAs are still struggling to recruit suitably experienced staff and to cover a wide range of activities with a small number of people. The situation can be exacerbated by the involvement of high-quality staff in national initiatives and special projects; although these staff are supportive of the general thrust of these policies they are also aware of their effect at a local level.

Uncertainty over the LEA role in school improvement

A consequence of the declining power and influence of LEAs has been an uncertainty over what exactly they should be doing. The 1999 Code of Practice of LEA–School relations (DfEE, 1999), for example, is seen as problematic because LEAs are charged with the responsibility of promoting and sharing good practice, but at the same time are limited by the code in terms of the access they can have with schools, particularly high-performing schools. There are signs of planning for a reduced role for the LEA in the future. This intent was clearly signalled by the Secretary of State in his speech to the ACEO spring conference on 27 March 2003 (Clarke, 2003), in which city academies, private finance initiative schemes, the role of the Learning and Skills Council in relation to 14–19 education, and the role of the Specialist Schools Trust, were all mentioned as examples of diversity of provision. LEAs were told directly that they were no longer monopoly providers, and they needed to ‘reinvent’ themselves for a new age. The five year plan, announced in 2004, consolidated this planned process.

Emphasis on school autonomy

The process of increased institutional autonomy has been encouraged through a range of policies and

initiatives and has included an emphasis on the importance of the extra power that schools have over their budgets, as more finances are devolved from the local authority's central funds. However, it is not only funding that is being delegated to schools, as choices over curriculum and target setting are also aims of current policy. In the DfES (2003b) document *Excellence and Enjoyment*, for example, the current primary strategy sets out a key aim of empowering primary schools to take control of their curriculum. What is significant for LEAs in all these points is that they are being excluded from a growing range of school activities, thus making the delivery of school-improvement strategies more difficult.

LEA areas of working

Given changes in the role of the LEA and uncertainty regarding future roles, it is not surprising to find that there is much variation in terms of the approaches that LEAs take to attempt to raise school standards. Despite this variation, the literature review did reveal that there are certain commonly identified areas of LEA work in relation to school improvement and raising standards. These can be summarised as follows.

The collection and use of data

There is no doubt that the use and collection of data to support school improvement is an area where LEAs are rapidly expanding their level of activity and effectiveness. The different uses of data in contributing to school improvement strategies can be summarised from the literature as follows:

- measuring school performance through the results of whole cohorts of pupils in end-of-key-stage tests and public examinations
- comparing the performance of schools with other schools (nationally, locally or statistical neighbours)
- measuring the performance of particular groups of pupils
- identifying value added in the performance statistics for individuals, groups of pupils and whole cohorts
- measuring improvement over time
- identifying schools causing concern.

The link adviser

It was evident from the literature that link advisers (or school improvement partners in New Relationship trial LEAs) work with groups of schools within an LEA and can act as a conduit for information between schools and the LEA, schools and national initiatives and between schools themselves. Schools may have increasing access to data, but are not always able on their own to translate it into action for improvement.

The LEA as 'critical friend'

The phrase 'critical friend', in this context, essentially refers to someone who is committed to the success of the work of the school and its improvement, who understands the context within which it operates and who can offer an alternative perspective and critique. LEAs, through their experience and expertise, are in a strong position to fulfil this function, though some government statements suggest that such individuals might also be recruited from the private sector. The idea of a critical friend or school improvement partner can be linked with plans for the development of a 'single conversation', with the critical friend acting as a single source of advice on school-improvement matters.

Supporting 'less successful schools'

Under the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act (GB. Statutes, 1998) and the 1999 Code of Practice of LEA-school relations (DfEE, 1999), LEAs are expected to have a minimum of intervention in highly successful schools and have extensive powers to intervene in 'schools causing concern'. Most schools can be categorised as being between these extremes and some LEAs operate a formal policy of intervention in inverse proportion to success. Alongside this, however, there is a real tension between concentrating resources and attention on the worst performing schools and helping all schools. One way of addressing this tension, supported by a national drive for partnership working, is to create situations where schools themselves work together.

Professional development

Providing continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities for school staff is a traditional role of LEAs that has been weakened by the devolving of budgets to schools and the creation of a market in school services. National initiatives such as the establishment of the National College for School Leadership may also dilute LEA involvement in CPD. However, the literature review

revealed that there is still a general recognition that LEAs are important providers of CPD, and several examples of the types of professional development opportunities provided can be found in LEA/DfES compact agreements.

Recruitment and retention

Recent literature on the roles of LEAs indicates that recruitment and retention of staff is a major concern. There are, however, some indications that LEAs are working with central agencies (such as the Teacher Training Agency) and with other local authorities to address these difficulties. From 2001 central government funds (Teacher Recruitment and Retention Funds) were also provided to help schools and LEAs to improve the remuneration package for teachers in areas facing recruitment and retention difficulties. Local strategies included promoting the authority as a good place to work, providing training and development opportunities for staff, providing affordable housing and in some cases using 'golden hellos and handcuffs'.

Partnership working

Recent governments have, through various policy documents, underlined their commitment to partnership working both between LEAs and schools, and between central and local government. However, the literature review revealed that there has been little research on the outcomes of such partnership working. It was clear from the review that LEAs interact with school partnerships in a number of different ways, depending to some extent on the nature and purpose of the partnership concerned. Few partnerships directly involved central government, though a central government initiative might have acted as a catalyst for the setting up of partnerships. One key study in this area (Rudd *et al.*, 2004) concluded that although partnership working demands time and commitment from member schools and the LEA, the perceived benefits are considerable, and those involved generally regard such working as worthwhile.

1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the background and aims of the 'Raising School Standards' evaluation. It also outlines the methodology of the review and the structure of the report.

It should be emphasised that this literature review is one outcome of an evaluation, funded by the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), into the implementation of the National–Local Shared Priorities for Public Services (ODPM, 2002). There are seven such shared priorities, i.e. areas for which there is agreement that 'it is most important to deliver tangible improvements over the next three years' (LGA, 2002, p. 2).¹ This review, compiled by a team from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) concerns the shared priority for education, entitled 'Raising standards across all our schools'.

The main aim of the literature review is to provide an up-to-date picture of the context within which the national–local priority of 'raising standards across schools' is being implemented. Subsidiary aims include for the review have been to:

- identify the main roles that national government and LEAs currently take in relation to raising school standards
 - consider what the literature says about the relative importance and effectiveness of these various roles: 'what are the most efficient and effective ways for national government and LEAs to work with schools?'
 - examine what the literature reveals about the nature and effectiveness of national–LEA–school–community working – what is the evidence regarding the success (or otherwise) of networking and partnership arrangements?
 - develop a series of signposts relating to the literature – which documents are most useful for LEAs, what do they say about transferring good practice, are there any gaps in the literature that need to be filled?
- In order to meet these aims, the literature review had to have a clear focus. The following foci were used as the various items of literature were being selected and examined.
- There was to be an emphasis on the LEA role. National policies encourage LEA involvement to varying levels and the review primarily covered those policies, programmes and initiatives within which the LEA had a significant role.
 - There was an emphasis on lower achieving schools – one of the central questions of the review related to the issue of how higher achieving schools can pass on their good practice so as to assist the raising of standards in schools with a variety of pupil attainment levels.
 - The notion of schools (and also of national/local organisations) working together is of particular importance within the raising standards priority, as is multi-agency working – hence there was an emphasis in the review on school networks or groups and partnership working.
 - Much of the LEA literature focuses on school–community links. These are likely to become increasingly important in the future, to the extent that one LGA discussion document (LGA, 2000, p.1) makes reference to community learning centres, rather than 'schools' and represent one form of partnership working.

¹ The implementation of the seven priorities has been evaluated by a consortium of organisations directed by Howard Davis of the Local Government Centre at Warwick Business School.

- There is an emphasis on new ways of working and the review looked particularly for innovative policies or approaches. These included national policies, such as Federations and the Leading Edge Partnership Programme (where LEAs are involved) as well as local arrangements (e.g. 'pyramids', 'families' of schools, cross-LEA working, LEAs working together).
- Finally and linked with the previous point, the review was focused in chronological terms. The seven national–local agreed areas for improvement were announced in July 2002 (ODPM, 2002) so it is only after that date that publications/documents could directly address this stated priority.

A three-stage methodology was used to conduct the literature review. These stages could be summarised as:

1. the identification of relevant documents
2. the analysis of these documents
3. synthesising the reviews/findings.

Stage 1 – The identification of relevant websites and documentation

The NFER Library carried out searches of identified organisations' and networks' websites to find relevant documentation. Library staff also searched national databases such as the British Education Index, the British Official Publications Current Awareness Service and Current Educational Research in the UK as well as the Library's own internal bibliographical databases.

Stage 2 – Analysis of documentation

The researchers developed an appropriate framework for analysing the documentation and information (see Appendix 3). This framework covered:

- form of document (e.g. electronic or printed, guidance document, journal article)
- key themes of the document
- examples of LEA work
- perceptions of the LEA role
- recommendations made and solutions/reforms proposed

Stage 3 – Signposting the 'raising standards' landscape

The researchers synthesised the document reviews in order to signpost key documents relating to the LEA role in raising standards across all schools. One of the purposes of the literature review was to help the researchers to build up and maintain a picture of ongoing policy developments. This included the analysis of key texts, such as: *Excellence and Enjoyment: a Strategy for Primary Schools* (DfES, 2003b) and *A New Specialist System: Transforming Secondary Education* (DfES, 2003c). The researchers also drew on their experience of attending conferences and seminars, for example on: 'Using Data to Raise Achievement' (The Education Network/DfES/ ConFED, London 11 February 2004) and 'The Single Conversation: A New Relationship with Schools' (GTC Seminar, London, 4 March 2004).

Structure of the report

Chapter 1 sets out the aims and methodology of the review.

Chapter 2 summarises the key literature on the national contribution to raising school standards: setting out the national government context.

Chapter 3 summarises the key literature on local contributions to raising school standards: setting out the local government context.

Chapter 4 summarises the main constraints on LEA working, as identified in the literature.

Chapter 5 identifies the key areas of LEA work in relation to raising standards.

Chapter 6 summarises the literature on national–local government partnership working.

Appendix 1 sets out the LEA role in school improvement in relation to Central Government.

Appendix 2 shows local and national activities for school improvement – degrees of partnership.

Appendix 3 is a copy of the analytical framework used for the literature review.

References and further reading.

2 National government context

Since 1988 there has been a clear strengthening of the central policy framework in education in general and in relation to school improvement in particular. The overarching system framework includes the 1988 National Curriculum, the 1993 creation of Ofsted and performance league tables alongside per capita funding arrangements and parental choice. This system of central control has been strengthened through the 1997 policy of 'naming and shaming' 'failing' schools and school closures and in 1998 the introduction of school improvement targets and literacy hour, the numeracy strategy and Key Stage 3 strategy in 2000.

Within this overarching system, central government has also strengthened its control of LEAs and teacher training. LEAs must produce education development plans that include how they will help schools establish 'robust mechanisms for self-evaluation'. LEAs are set their own targets for pupil attainment. They are inspected by Ofsted and 'failing' LEAs face private take-overs or at least central control. LEAs are also instructed to intervene in schools in inverse proportion to their success. Teacher training has seen the introduction of national standards for teachers, including:

- advanced skills teachers
- Ofsted inspection of teacher trainers
- numeracy, literacy and information and communications technology (ICT) tests for trainees
- performance related pay and the national qualifications for aspiring headteachers
- parents have faced home-school contracts and in extreme cases, the jailing of parents of truants.

The above analysis applies to both primary and secondary schools. In *A New Specialist System; transforming secondary education* (DfES, 2003c) the government sets out its current strategy for secondary schools. This document groups the various strands of policy into four areas.

1. A specialist system

- Increase the number of specialist schools and the range of specialisms.
- The Leading Edge programme (to supersede Beacon schools).
- 60 more Training Schools.
- 33 Academies by 2006 (to supersede Fresh Start).
- Set up Federations of schools to work together.
- The creation of Networked Learning Communities.

2. Leadership

- A programme of training and support for leadership from the National College of School Leadership.
- The Leadership Incentive Grant – 1400 schools in toughest areas will get £125,000 p.a. to improve leadership at all levels.
- LEAs encouraged to train governors.
- Weakest headteachers to be replaced.

3. Partnership beyond the classroom

- All schools to provide some kind of out-of-hours study support by 2006.
- 240 schools to be developed as 'community hubs' – Extended Schools.
- Intensive support to 400 schools to address behaviour and attendance.
- New measures to address behaviour and truancy.

- Excellence in Cities (plus London Challenge Strategy).
- Connexions to prioritise improving attendance.

4. Workforce reform

- National agreement.
- Recruit more support staff.
- Reduce bureaucracy.

These four areas are intended to support: the key stage 3 strategy; greater flexibility at key stage 4 and maximising the potential of ICT throughout the curriculum.

3 Local government context

Wikeley *et al.* (2002) have noted that:

The role of the LEA is to offer advice and support services to schools and provide performance data to help schools set their own improvement targets. The choice is left to schools as to whether or not they buy these services. The relationship between schools and their LEA is therefore very dependent on local circumstances. However, LEAs are also encouraged to support networks of headteachers and governors and develop new initiatives to bring schools together [and] linking schools with other local agencies....

(p. 365)

This remains a fair summary with the addition of the LEA role in producing education development plans (EDPs) that include how they will help schools establish 'robust mechanisms for self-evaluation' and intervening in schools in inverse proportion to their success. LEAs are also specifically now being encouraged to increase and improve the training of governors. In some areas LEAs have played, and continue to play, a pivotal role in national strategies like Excellence in Cities.

Some LEAs have been more proactive than others in pursuing an independent school improvement programme. Birmingham LEA, for example, has been developing a strategy for school improvement since 1993 and its influence can be seen in national policy and more recent programmes such as the London Challenge. However, even in Birmingham the scope for local initiative seems to have diminished and the documentation produced for the 2002 inspection of the authority essentially shows a local response to national policy in terms of school improvement (Birmingham City Council Education Service, 2002).

In some respects, the policy framework set in motion by the Education Reform Act (GB. Statutes, 1988) and built upon in subsequent legislation has not significantly changed in character to the present day. However, the combination of increased central government control over education and the increased autonomy of schools has significantly reduced the scale and scope of LEA activities over the last 15 years. The

process of increased institutional autonomy is described by Ofsted (2003a):

The Education Reform Act 1988 reallocated the balance of responsibilities and authority for managing schools from local education authorities to the head teacher and governors of individual schools. This shifted a much greater responsibility for decision-making to school level. In recent years, the proportion of funding delegated to schools' own control has increased and this has added to the powers of headteachers and governors to manage their schools.

(p. 5)

Specifically, within the process of centralisation, LEAs have lost:

- the entire post-compulsory sector
- their monopoly position as suppliers of educational services and training
- their role in inspection
- in some cases (for example city academies) any role in schools at all.

At the same time LEA staff have increasingly been required to work on central government initiatives such as the literacy, numeracy and KS3 strategies and Excellence in Cities. Although much of the work done under these initiatives has been welcomed by LEA staff, they have not provided the ideal context for partnership working as they have started out as top down rather than bottom up policies.

The current framework for LEA involvement in school improvement is influenced by the following legislation and ministerial directives:

- School Standards and Framework Act (GB. Statutes, 1998)
- Code of Practice of LEA–school relations (DfEE, 1999; revised 2001)

- Speech by Secretary of State to the ACEO conference (Clarke, 2003)
- 2003 DfES/LGA statement on compacts (DfES, 2003a)
- 2004 the 'Single Conversation' and 'New relationship' between schools and LEAs (Miliband, 2004; DfES, 2004c)
- The new five year plan for education, launched in July 2004 (DfES, 2004a).

In March 2003 the idea was launched by the Secretary of State of all LEAs entering into a formal compact with the DfES to outline shared objectives and the respective responsibilities of the two parties. However, the content of the partnership agreement drawn up between the LGA and the DfES (DfES, 2003d), demonstrates the primacy of the national policy framework over local initiatives:

This partnership agrees to focus on:

- *providing high quality education and childcare for more children*
- *continuing the progress already made in primary education*
- *transforming secondary education*
- *developing a flexible and challenging 14–19 phase of education*
- *transforming the school workforce and in particular freeing teachers to focus on their professional responsibilities.*

(p. 2)

4 Constraints on LEAs

Although LEAs have played, and continue to play, an important role in school improvement, they are not free to do as they please. There are many constraints on both the scope and type of actions that LEAs can initiate in pursuit of school improvement. This chapter examines these limiting constraints on LEAs and seeks to set a context within which the next chapter, which looks at the actual areas of school improvement work done by LEAs, can be understood.

4.1 Funding

Under the Fair Funding requirements set out in 1998 Standards and Framework Act (GB. Statutes, 1998) LEAs are permitted to retain central funding to support their role in specific areas, including school improvement. However, LEAs have been encouraged to keep this central funding to a minimum. The green paper Modernising Local Government Finance (DTLR, 2000) proposed that LEAs should be made to delegate at least 90 per cent of funds to schools. This has not been achieved yet, but the pressure is on LEAs to work towards this.

Ofsted also now inspects LEAs and in their LEA Framework for the inspection of local education authorities (Ofsted, 2004) one of the main questions they have to answer is: does the LEA manage its functions efficiently and economically? An example of how this question is answered can be found in the latest Ofsted inspection report of Tower Hamlets, a high spending authority that has to deal with many schools in difficulties:

The high cost of several services and the proportion of funds retained centrally were major concerns in the first inspection report. Since then, the LEA has effectively used Fair Funding and Best Value principles to reduce costs and put in place realistic plans to reduce them further in the next financial year. The level of delegation of the local schools' budget is set to increase from 79 per cent in 1999/2000 to 86 per cent in 2000/2001.

(Ofsted, 2000, p. 10)

Whilst it may be good for schools to have control over a larger budget, this process limits the scope of LEA action to deliver school improvement strategies as reduced funding for the centre means reduced capacity at the centre.

As well as following the principles of Fair Funding, from April 2000 all local authorities have been required to operate within the Best Value framework. As Woods and Cribb (2001) point out this includes the willingness to use alternative methods of service delivery, which in practice means non-LEA providers for some services for schools. Despite this reduction in centrally held budgets and pressure to open up the market in educational services, many schools still have high expectations of the level of service to be provided by their LEA. Derrington (2000) highlights the tensions created by schools' continuing expectation that LEAs should provide a comprehensive and free service to them, despite the delegation of funds to the schools themselves, who have no obligation to continue purchasing services from the LEAs.

4.2 Human resources

There also appears to be a significant problem for LEAs in terms of the human resources available for school improvement work. A series of surveys of LEA Advisory and Inspection Services (AIS) by EMIE has charted the decline in numbers of LEA inspectors and advisers and advisory teachers through the 1990s (Dean, 1993, 1994; Mann, 1995; Hendy, 1998). More recently, Arnold (2002) reports from a survey of all LEAs that many Advisory and Inspection teams are working at full stretch. They are struggling to recruit suitably experienced staff and to cover a wide range of activities with a small number of people.

A further challenge for AIS staff was the need to learn new skills. Thirty six of the 42 responding LEAs thought that since 1998 the process of school improvement had required 'significantly different skills experience and knowledge' for AIS than in the past. In a related survey of all LEAs, Morton *et al.* (2002) reported that 39 of the

42 managers responding said that they had experienced recruitment difficulties in the last three years. The main factors were thought by respondents to be the uncertainty of the role of LEAs combined with an unfavourable salary differential compared to senior staff in schools who would be suitably qualified for the job.

According to Fletcher-Campbell and Lee (2003) recruitment and retention were having adverse effects in schools which directly affected raising standards of achievement. The situation was exacerbated by the involvement of high quality staff in national initiatives and special projects (Excellence in Cities, Education Action Zones, Single Regeneration Budget, National Literacy/Numeracy Strategy) and the creation of a feeling of the 'separateness' of these.

The point of view that LEA staff were being pulled into national initiatives at the expense of local ones was also discovered by Wikeley *et al.* (2002) in their study of Birmingham:

The success of the [local school improvement] programme in part depended on the quality of advisers and trainers involved – they previously had been able to give a lot of time to it, but were now being expected to give more time to central initiatives like EIC and EAZs.
(p. 376)

A similar perspective was noted by Fletcher-Campbell and Lee (2003) who produced evidence of LEA officers supporting national priorities, but with an important caveat:

All the LEA officers interviewed were actively and positively engaged in implementing national policies and were supportive of their general thrust; however, they did make observations about the effect of policies in the local context and were wary when they perceived that national policies were going to inhibit those activities which, they believed, had had an excellent track record locally in raising standards of achievement in schools.
(p. iv)

4.3 Uncertainty over the LEA role in school improvement, now and in the future

A consequence of the declining power and influence of LEAs has been an uncertainty over what exactly they should be doing as their role has changed dramatically over the last 15 years. For example, the 1999 Code of Practice of LEA school relations (DfEE, 1999) is seen by Arnold (2002) as problematic, because LEAs are charged with the responsibility of promoting and sharing good practice, but are limited by the code of relations in the access they can have with schools, particularly limited in relation to high performing schools. The Code of Practice on LEA–School Relations sets out both the responsibilities of LEAs but also the restraints on action. LEAs are charged with supporting self-improvement in all schools but must not 'duplicate the HMI [Her Majesty's Inspectorate] monitoring role' nor do they have 'general permission to enter schools whenever they wish, particularly in the case of successful schools, where such visits may serve little purpose.'

There may be uncertainty over the current role of LEAs in school improvement, but the government is planning a reduced role for the future. This intent was clearly signalled by the Secretary of State in his Speech to the spring conference of the Association of Chief Education Officers (ACEO) on 27 March 2003 (Clarke, 2003). It is worth quoting it at some length.

In their core role LEAs will not in the future, for example, necessarily be automatic providers of new schools as we invite other education providers to submit proposals. City Academies, that are part of the maintained system but separate from LEAs, are becoming an increasing part of the scene. More and more big capital projects involve working with the private sector in PFI [private finance initiative] schemes.

Leadership role – the arrival of the Learning and Skills Council means that there is a different dynamic to the planning of 16–19 and, increasingly, 14–19 provision. The relationship with head teachers is changing as we devolve more freedom to them.

School improvement – schools no longer buy in their curriculum support exclusively from their LEA. Federations of schools are starting to open new possibilities in providing curriculum support. Some LEAs

are choosing to share inspection services. The Specialist Schools Trust is providing school improvement support to more and more schools.

All of these developments are characterised by one factor: increased diversity. The age of the monopoly provider in public services has gone. These changes will pose challenges for you, your lead members and your authorities. How you respond to them will determine your future role. Resist this agenda and risk being bypassed. Embrace it and help to reinvent LEAs for a new age. It's your choice.

This limiting of the role of LEAs with more power given to private companies, government-related agencies and individual schools has been taken further by the new (DfES, 2004a) five year plan for education. This plan proposes to rapidly increase the number of city academies and to allow so-called successful schools to be independent from the LEAs. Funding for schools would come totally from ring-fenced central grants and be guaranteed over three-year periods, removing local government's role in the funding of schools. It is not yet clear what role would remain for LEAs in school improvement, but LEA access to schools would be greatly restricted.

More uncertainty over the future role of LEAs in school improvement has been created from the concept of creating a single conversation with school. In his speech delivered at the North of England Education Conference, Belfast, 8 January 2004, the minister for schools set out government's plans for developing a 'single conversation: the provision of a school improvement partner or 'critical friend' to discuss with and authorise targets set by the Head and Governing body of the school' (Miliband, 2004, p.12).

It is not yet clear how big a role the LEA will be expected to play in this relationship, but most of the pilot schemes have involved close working between schools, the school improvement partner (SIP) and the LEA.

4.4 Emphasis on school-based initiatives/school autonomy

The process of increased institutional autonomy has been outlined by Ofsted (2003a) and this clearly emphasises the importance of the extra power which schools have over their budgets.

However, it is not only funding which is being delegated to schools as choices over curriculum and target setting are also aims of current policy. The DfES sets out the current primary strategy (DfES, 2003b), which aims, among other things to:

- empower primary schools to take control of their curriculum and to be more innovative and to develop their own character
- to enable schools to set their own targets for Level 4 and 5 at KS2 based on challenging but realistic targets for the progress of each child in the school, with LEA targets being set afterwards
- to encourage schools to network together and to learn from others in sharing and developing good practice
- to work in partnership with parents and make wider links with the community
- for the government to act more as an enabler with schools increasingly in control of the support they get to strengthen leadership and to help schools design a broad rich curriculum.

What is significant for LEAs in all these points is that they are being excluded from a growing range of school activities, thus making the delivery of school improvement strategies more difficult.

Conclusion

What is clear from this discussion of the constraints on LEAs in terms of school improvement work is that it is increasingly difficult for LEAs to actually deliver a school improvement strategy. How strong a strategic role they can retain is not yet clear.

5 LEAs: areas of working

Despite the constraints that LEAs are working under, the literature does reveal a wide range of areas in which they are working to raise standards in schools. Some of these are clearly identifiable as relating to school improvement while others can be categorised as more general support functions for the school system. This chapter starts with some general studies of the role of the LEA in school improvement and then looks in turn at individual areas of LEA work. The categories that we have looked at have emerged from the literature in general, but also specifically from two overarching studies.

One study in Wales looked to identify LEA strategies for school improvement and developed the following categories (National Assembly for Wales, DfTE, 2002):

- link advisers who monitor the school's performance, sharing relevant data with the school leadership team and helping the school governors to set performance and other targets, frame school development plans and embed self-evaluation into the culture of the school
- in-service education and training (INSET) for leadership and CPD
- data use for target setting
- systems for identifying and helping schools causing concern
- support to governing bodies
- addressing gender differences in attainment and the lack of progress at KS3 relative to KS2, flexibility at KS4 for disaffected pupils
- a number of LEAs believed that recruitment and retention of school staff will become an increasing concern especially for schools in deprived areas.

In a literature review of the evidence of successful strategies (general strategies, not specific to LEAs) for

improvement in lower achieving schools, Muijs (2003) identifies the following categories:

- a relentless focus on teaching and learning is a key characteristic of effective and improving schools
- creating positive relationships with parents and local community
- to be effective schools need to become learning communities
- an emphasis on CPD
- leadership plays a key role
- using data to inform decision making can enhance effectiveness and aid improvement
- creating a positive school culture
- external support – 'local education authorities and institutions of higher education (HE) have also provided the support that led to improvement in many schools'.

There is a healthy cross-over between these two lists particularly in relation to data provision and use, training and targeted support, which were also the most significant broad areas of LEA work that have emerged from this study. The literature reviewed for this report shows a variety of approaches to these areas of work by different LEAs and in the following sections of this chapter some illustrative examples will be provided along with some analysis of the issues involved. Some of the wider functions of LEAs will also be considered in relation to their possible impact on school improvement.

Two studies have specifically looked at the issue of the changing role of LEAs in recent years and have identified a number of areas in which LEAs work successfully for school improvement.

Derrington (2000) looked at ten LEAs to investigate their role in school improvement in the light of the

1998 School Standards and Framework Act (GB. Statutes, 1998) and the 1999 Code of Practice of LEA–school relations (DfEE, 1999). She found that:

- LEAs impact on school improvement indirectly, because they provide the range of practical and professional support that enables schools to function effectively and therefore focus on raising standards
- in order to improve schools need to be part of a wider association; otherwise they can too easily become isolated and ossified
- LEAs help to raise standards because they develop and maintain an essential overview
- teachers need LEAs to help them develop their skills and expertise.

Fletcher-Campbell and Lee (2003) in their report for the DfES surveyed all LEAs and conducted case studies of 11. Essential LEA functions, which a wide range of interviewees considered to be critical to raising standards of achievement, included:

- identifying and sharing good practice by establishing, maintaining and facilitating the use of professional networks
- challenging existing standards by facilitating an ethos of 'a learning community' which encouraged all practitioners actively to seek challenge after self-evaluation and reflection
- analysing data in such a way that the needs and achievements of the whole community are considered, thus extending the scope of individual schools' analyses
- making funding streams coherent
- ensuring capacity-building and succession-planning by taking a long-term view of staff and institutional development needs and directly providing, or facilitating, a range of opportunities to meet these.

Despite the uncertainty of the role of LEAs in school improvement, a range of studies have identified a variety of activities undertaken by LEAs that make a real and important contribution to raising school standards.

It should be noted however that these studies were mainly looking for good practice and examples of active involvement of LEAs in school improvement. Given the number and diversity of LEAs it is fair to assume that the actual roles taken by different LEAs and the effectiveness of what they do is varied.

5.1 LEAs and the collection and use of data

Although critics (Wrigley, 2004) are unhappy with the dominance of using easily quantifiable outcomes for measuring school effectiveness and improvement, there is no doubt that the use and collection of data is playing an increasingly important role in school improvement strategies. In a meta-analysis of Ofsted and Audit Commission reports Bird and Fowler (2004) argue that since 1998 (because of the role outlined for them in the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act (GB. Statutes, 1998)) LEAs have played an important role in school improvement. In particular the use of data to support this is an area where LEAs are rapidly expanding their level of activity and effectiveness. In fact, Bird and Fowler (2004) make a case that there has been a 'revolution in the use of data', which has been brought about by:

- the increase in available performance data at pupil level delivered by the National Curriculum assessment arrangements and GCSE
- the power and availability of information and communications technology (ICT) to process information
- the school improvement and accountability framework initially established by Ofsted school inspections and latterly reinforced through the new role of the LEA in school improvement.

The different uses of data in contributing to school improvement strategies can be summarised from the literature as follows:

- measuring school performance through the results of whole cohorts of pupils in end-of-key-stage tests and public examinations
- comparing the performance of schools with other schools (nationally, locally or statistical neighbours)

- measuring the performance of particular groups of pupils
- identifying value-added in the performance of individuals, groups of pupils and whole cohorts
- measuring improvement over time
- identifying schools causing concern.

In a study of 11 LEAs by Fletcher-Campbell and Lee (2003), there was agreement across all case-study authorities that data collection was vital to the successful outcomes of monitoring and evaluation and that in turn data collection was a key role of the LEA in raising standards of achievement. Muijs (2003) looked for successful strategies for school improvement in under-performing schools and found that the use of data to inform decision making can enhance effectiveness and aid school improvement. In an evaluation of ten schools in Birmingham LEA, Wikeley *et al.* (2002) reported that all the schools visited valued the statistical performance data provided by the LEA.

Bird and Fowler (2004) present five case studies of how LEAs have developed procedures, protocols and packages to work with all their schools to help raise pupil achievement and to monitor schools. North Lincolnshire and Hampshire formed two of the five case studies. Having found the nationally provided data packages lacking, North Lincolnshire LEA has pioneered the provision of individual pupil packages to schools which enable schools to set realistic targets in line with national expectations. This has been developed into a school performance measure. Hampshire LEA has pioneered the use of multi-level modelling with its primary schools. This sophisticated statistical technique requires a large number of schools to participate and has the reputation of being difficult to communicate its findings. The county has been working with its schools to overcome this difficulty and evidence is presented that headteachers find it a powerful tool for self-evaluation.

Cornwall LEA is another authority that actively encourages the use of data in supporting school improvement, which it does in a spirit of local collaboration and partnership. To this end they have developed the Secondary School Data Group, consisting of secondary headteacher representatives, the

secondary inspector, statisticians and system support officers, who provide data and analysis to schools to aid their self review (Cornwall County Council, 2003). Telford and Wrekin LEA, in their draft compact with the DfES (2003a), outlined their intention to improve delivery of performance at KS3 and tackle school under-performance at all key stages by using data effectively to improve departmental success rates and provide training for heads of departments and literacy managers. In their draft compact Rochdale LEA committed themselves to 'continue to improve the quality and effective use, of data (including value added) to identify and target individual groups of schools and pupils.'

The above examples are illustrative in nature and are not meant to be in any way representative or comprehensive in their coverage, which would be difficult to achieve given the variety of practice among LEAs. In a study of the ways in which LEAs support schools in the use of performance data, Rudd and Davies (2002) found that there was considerable variation in analysis, use and collection of data across LEAs. However, it should be noted that the above examples do not show any significant national level input or national–local partnership.

Issues also emerged from the literature about the coherence of data sets, the weight attached to different inputs and the sensitivity of the data set to small changes. In one authority from the Fletcher-Campbell and Lee (2003) study, schools could change the degree of importance placed on individual strands of the data (which determined the degree of LEA intervention) by self-nomination if, for example, there was a new headteacher or chair of the governing body or a significant proportion of staff were newly qualified teachers. In another authority, using three categories to make judgements (standards and progress, quality of provision and management and efficiency), the LEA flagged up areas where a low rating would automatically trigger an alert, regardless of how the other ratings panned out (for example, an automatic trigger would be a low rating in the 'quality of teaching' category).

In terms of improving the production and use of data by LEAs, Rudd and Davies (2002) suggested that LEAs look at:

- simplifying and streamlining the presentation of data to schools

- improving the timeliness of data provision, support and guidance at local levels
- encouraging schools to conduct dialogues and to share good practice
- keeping a focus on the 'bigger picture', on the strategic implications of school and pupil data.

This last point reinforces the importance of realising that it is not the data itself that makes improvements, but how that data is used. A key figure in most LEAs in terms of their relationship with schools and the creation of a dialogue around performance data is the link adviser.

5.2 The link adviser

Link advisers work with groups of schools within an LEA and can act as a conduit for information between schools and the LEA, schools and national initiatives and between schools themselves. Schools may have increasing access to data, but are not always able on their own to translate it into action for improvement. Woods and Cribb (2001) give an example of five London LEAs who were noted by Ofsted for demonstrating particularly good practice in respect of their Inspection and Advisory service. One of the features of this was:

High calibre staff, usually link advisers or inspectors, who had credibility with schools and who were able to provide, not only rigorous evaluation, but also strategies for improvement.

(p. 11, emphasis added).

Derrington (2000) points out that it is hard to separate out the work of advisers from other inputs and measure a direct impact on school improvement, but most of the 28 schools in her study appreciated the work of advisers. However, the complexity of the task and limited human resources available to LEAs as outlined in the previous chapter do impose limits on the action of advisers. The role of advisers in Birmingham is summarised in their school improvement strategy document from 2002:

In accordance with the Code of Practice on LEA School Relations, the Birmingham Advisory and Support Service has established a basic entitlement

for all schools to monitoring, evaluation and advice in the form of 3 half-day visits per year by a link adviser. The aim of each visit is to provide objective and specific advice based on monitoring the school's progress towards its performance targets and on an evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses. Link advisers have worked to a common agenda related to the EDP [education development plan] each term.

(Birmingham City Council Education Service, 2002, para. 3.4)

This description gives a flavour of the directive nature of the advice given and the potential resulting tension between schools and their advisers in this role as a 'critical friend'.

5.3 The LEA as 'critical friend'

The phrase 'critical friend' is frequently used, but open to interpretation (Swaffield, 2003). In terms of a school it essentially implies someone who is committed to the success of the work of the school and its improvement, who understands the context within which it operates and who can offer an alternative perspective and critique. LEAs, through their advisers, are in a strong position to fulfil this function. The minister for schools, David Miliband, in his speech to the North of England conference in 2004 stated the government's intention to 'develop the concept of a 'single conversation': the provision of a school improvement partner or 'critical friend' to discuss with and authorise targets set by the Head and Governing body of the school' (Miliband, 2004, p. 12).

It should be noted that he did not specifically mention LEAs in this role, presumably because of the government's commitment to involve the private and voluntary sectors in this process too. However, LEAs will remain the most likely critical friends due to their expertise and knowledge, as was pointed out in Fletcher-Campbell and Lee (2003) who reported that:

Data collection processes and schedules were generally effective and had been refined over the years. LEA officers generally reported that schools analysed their own data analysis effectively but appreciated sharing data with an external 'critical friend' – in particular, someone with knowledge of comparable data and similar schools in the authority.

(p. viii)

Staff in schools generally welcomed the type of relationships with LEA officers which allowed for within-school difficulties to be noted and aired. Problems arose either where schools hid, or did not acknowledge, their difficulties and, at the same time, LEA scrutiny and questioning was insufficiently rigorous and the sources of potential support were not made clear.

(p. vi)

In Birmingham the system involves a range of statistical returns and reports which, together with link adviser monitoring, raise an agenda of challenge to be addressed within individual schools and groups of schools. A model for this new 'critical friend' relationship could be Surrey, whose system (a public-private partnership) was described in the latest inspection report of the LEA (Ofsted, 2003c) as follows.

Through an attached consultant, all schools receive a core service that is highly focused on the monitoring of each school's improvement plan, self-evaluation outcomes, and procedures for target setting. Within five different levels, schools receive additional amounts of intervention and support dependent upon need and these are clearly specified, but flexible enough to be fit for purpose.

(p.18, para 62)

This last point brings out a very important aspect of the role of LEAs in school improvement and that is their duty to help schools that are struggling.

5.4 Supporting 'less successful schools'

Under the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act (GB. Statutes, 1998) and the 1999 Code of Practice of LEA-school relations (DfEE, 1999), LEAs are expected to have a minimum of intervention in highly successful schools and have extensive powers to intervene in 'schools causing concern'. Most schools can be categorised as being between these extremes and some LEAs operate a formal policy of intervention in inverse proportion to success. In a survey investigating the role of the advisory and inspection services in 42 LEAs, Arnold (2002) found that nine LEAs operated such a policy. Northamptonshire, for example, categorises its schools as low, medium and high contact as far as the frequency of visits is concerned. Schools in the first of

these categories receive three days of visits per year and those in the second receive up to six. Schools in the 'high contact' category have individually tailored visiting programmes to meet the needs of their action plans. Surrey has five categories of relative success and Cambridge and Cornwall add to their routine monitoring visits an 'additional day for schools causing concern'. In their draft compact with the DfES (2003a) Kingston-upon-Thames commits itself to establishing more consistency between schools' standards by targeting LEA consultancy, advice and support to schools where there is greatest need to close achievement gaps and improve under-performance. In response to their 2001 Ofsted inspection Hampshire County Council revised their categorisation system of schools into four simpler categories and redefined the notion of successful schools. This system was then used to limit attached inspectors to one visit a year to successful schools and to try and ensure that centrally-funded attached inspector resources are used to maximum effect to challenge and support underperforming schools and those at risk of serious weakness.

In his annual report published in February 2003, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector noted that support for underperforming schools remained a strength in most LEAs. In two thirds of LEAs inspected, fewer schools were in special measures than in the previous year. Of those that were, the proportion of LEAs giving good support to schools causing concern rose from 14 per cent in 1998 and 1999 to 30 per cent in 2000 and 2001. Underlying this success in focusing LEAs' work, Bird and Fowler (2004) point to the often very detailed data many now hold on the performance of their schools.

Bury, Sunderland and Surrey were awarded the highest grade (very good) for their work in the area of supporting less successful schools. The key strengths that were recognised by Ofsted and the Audit Commission as characterising these three authorities were:

- well developed procedures
- effective and sharply focused monitoring
- regular reporting to elected members
- a clear exit strategy involving a gradual reduction in support.

In Bury senior officers review progress made by schools at fortnightly meetings of the quality and advisory service team and reports are presented to elected members. In Sunderland targets are set for underperforming teachers and improvement or removal has usually been swift or, alternatively, they have left their posts. In Surrey, school intervention plans are supported by written agreements between the school and the LEA and are monitored, at least termly, at a progress meeting for each school (Bird and Fowler, 2004).

There is, however, a real tension between concentrating resources and attention on the worst performing schools and helping all schools. Derrington (2000) found more than half of 100 school staff and governors that were interviewed in her study believed that all schools needed LEAs to help them improve. Only five thought that schools, in general, were capable of improving without LEA support. Arnold (2002) argues that the Code of Practice 'in one form of words or another steers LEAs away from inspecting yet expects them to locate and disseminate good practice' (p. 4).

One solution to this dilemma is for schools to work together. In their draft compact with the DfES (2003a) Telford and Wrekin LEA, reflecting a national drive towards partnership working, promise to narrow attainment gaps by encouraging high performing schools to collaborate with under performing schools to share good practice. Hampshire LEA, in response to their 2001 Ofsted inspection, created a policy to identify and release secondary headteachers to support the leadership and management of other secondary schools when there are weaknesses in the leadership and management of a school as identified by its categorisation or if the headteacher has requested mentorship because of management or other staffing difficulties. They also encourage experienced senior headteachers to share good practice in leadership and management through termly seminars for headteachers and summary information published on the web.

5.5 Professional development

Providing professional development opportunities for school staff is a traditional role of LEAs that has been weakened by the devolving of budgets to schools and the creation of a market in school services. National

initiatives such as the National College for School Leadership also take away from LEA involvement in CPD. However, in the DfEE strategy for CPD (DfEE, 2001), the government recognise the role of LEAs as one of a range of providers of CPD. In their survey of 105 LEAs and 62 schools with case-study visits to a further 18 schools Brown *et al.* (2001) found that LEAs still had a significant role in supporting teachers' CPD activities via:

providing and facilitating CPD, the role of the adviser, encouraging and facilitating networks and support groups and supplying information about CPD opportunities both within the LEA and further afield.
(p. iii)

Some of the draft LEA/DfES compacts (DfES, 2003a) give examples of LEAs agreeing to provide professional development in pursuit of a school improvement agenda. For example, Kingston-upon-Thames will provide consultancy in targeted schools to implement the Teaching and Learning Policy and to support the achievement of school targets. Rochdale will provide targeted support through consultancy and training to under-performing and low achieving schools and departments. Norfolk will provide specific training to headteachers and chairs of school governors on financial planning and management. There are also examples available from the published compacts (DfES, 2004a). Cornwall will provide consultancy and training for targeted schools and staff and a learning forum. According to a CCC document (Cornwall County Council, 2003):

The Cornwall Learning Forum (CLF) has been and continues to be, the central mechanism for disseminating new ideas about pedagogy, about ability and intelligence and about how learning can be improved. All of the CLF projects aim to increase the degree to which pupils are motivated to engage with learning.
(p. 3)

The same document also outlines the council's approach to staff development and retention through the Cornwall Centre for Educational Development (CCED) which:

actively promotes and supports staff development. Work of the centre includes an Integrated Career Development Programme which is a comprehensive

programme of training and support for teachers, headteachers, governors and support staff, informed by the Teachers' Standards Framework. In collaboration with CLF, CCED supports, develops and shares good practices in teaching and learning and links educational networks, including Networked Learning Communities, Advanced Skills Teachers and Beacon Schools, both within the county, nationally and internationally.

(p. 3)

This is therefore a good example of national–local partnership working. LEAs have also had a role in providing the necessary training for national strategies. For example, Ofsted (2002) praised the role of LEAs in providing training for schools:

- the initial training provided by LEAs, using national materials, was well received
- thereafter, LEA consultants, who were often new to the role, helped schools to refine their plans for the pilot and often contributed well to training in schools (p. 23).

The extent to which local implementation of the national strategies can be characterised as national–local working in partnership is difficult to judge solely from the literature. It does appear that initially, at least, the level of central direction left little scope for local input and that this has been slowly changing to allow more of a local role.

5.6 Recruitment and retention

Fletcher-Campbell and Lee (2003) found that:

In almost all case-study authorities recruitment and retention was cited as a current issue which had to be addressed in the drive towards raising standards of achievement: it was of considerable concern across the authorities and strategies to address the problems were cited by a number of LEA interviewees when describing current challenges. Responses included the appointment of dedicated recruitment officers in personnel departments and careful attention to career development (of which much of the support work and working with colleagues to share good practice was an important part).

(p. 47)

Morton (2002) surveyed LEAs about their recruitment and retention strategies and the 46 responding authorities demonstrated a wide range of work in this area. One nationally led strategy was the provision of funds via the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) for LEAs to create the post of Recruitment Strategy Manager (RSM) which was taken up by many of the responding authorities, sometimes as a shared post between several LEAs. Central government funds (Teacher Recruitment and Retention Funds) were also provided from 2001 for schools and LEAs to improve the remuneration package for teachers in areas facing recruitment and retention difficulties. Local strategies included promoting the authority as a good place to work, providing training and development opportunities for staff, providing affordable housing and in some cases using 'golden hellos and handcuffs'.

This does seem to be an area of genuine partnership between central and local government agencies.

6 Examples of partnership working

Collaboration can provide enriched educational opportunities for pupils and contribute to raising standards of education. While there is no single formula for a successful partnership, the idea of schools sharing resources and good practice is central to a number of government initiatives including Beacon schools, Specialist schools, Excellence in Cities (EiC) and Education Action Zones (EAZs).

The current government has, through various policy documents (including the White Paper, *Schools: Achieving Success* (GB. Parliament. HoC, 2001) and David Miliband's speech (Miliband, 2004), delivered at the North of England Education Conference, Belfast, 8 January 2004, underlined its commitment to partnership working both between LEAs and schools and between central and local government. However, a literature review conducted by Rudd *et al.* (2004) revealed that there was very little extant research on partnership working in general and that the studies that have been carried out have often looked only indirectly at partnership working, have been predominantly theoretical, or have been carried out as part of an evaluation of a particular policy.

Whilst achieving more effective partnerships between central and local government has become a more prominent policy objective, studies have given more attention to the partnerships between schools. This chapter briefly reviews this limited literature and draws on examples from LEAs to illustrate and assess the extent and the effectiveness of national–local and LEA–school partnerships that have the aim of raising school standards.

6.1 Literature on partnerships, networks and the LEA role

6.1.1 LEA role in school partnerships

A recent report for the DfES, based upon an evaluation of 'new ways of working' in LEAs, identified 'partnership' as a potentially important 'building block', or method of working, for LEAs (Indepen and Bannock

Consulting, 2003). Rudd *et al.* (2004), in their analysis of school partnership working, found that many different kinds of partnerships were encountered, including:

- transition partnerships, set up to ease the path of pupils transferring from primary to secondary school
- links between schools and further education (FE) colleges, based on the development of a 14–19 strategy
- links between state and independent schools (less common)
- Early Years and Childcare partnerships, which included the LEA and social services department as well as providers of early years education
- groups of schools established for the purpose of sharing good practice.

It was clear from the study that LEAs interacted with school partnerships in a number of ways, depending to some extent on the nature and purpose of the partnership concerned and that none of the partnerships involved central government. Active involvement of LEAs in partnerships tended to focus on any or all of the following areas:

- the bidding process (bringing schools together, writing bids and/or providing resources to enable school staff to do so)
- taking a lead role in the development of the partnership
- facilitating partnerships (e.g. providing resources or venues for meetings)
- providing funds, or acting as a channel for funding
- monitoring partnerships, to check their operation and achievements.

The authors' conclusion was that partnership working demands time and commitment from member schools and the LEA. However, the perceived benefits were considerable and those involved generally regarded it as worthwhile, despite the additional workload burdens it imposed.

It is important to note that LEAs provide a key service in establishing these networks (Dyson *et al.*, 2002) and evidence suggests that LEA officers and advisers provide a good deal more support than they are given credit for, an involvement that is often low-key and unpublicised (Derrington, 2000). Ofsted (2003b) recognised 'LEA's ability to collaborate with a wide range of partners,' as being key to their effectiveness (para. 11).

6.1.2 LEA and central government partnerships

Achieving more effective partnerships between central and local government has become a more prominent policy objective and is outlined by the DfES (2004a):

Central and local government share responsibility for the education service and we are committed to working together to provide the best possible education for our children and young people. High standards for all can best be realised through an effective partnership between the DfES and local authorities in which we recognise and respect each other's unique contribution.
(para. 3)

Yet despite this rhetoric there is evidence that there is still much to be done before cooperatives between central and local government can truly be called 'partnerships'. Moreover, 'Working together does not constitute partnership and parties to contracts are not necessarily partners' (Indepen and Bannock Consulting, 2003, p. 25).

One such example is that of Education Development Plans (EDPs) as documented by Arnold (1999) in his report 'Education Development Plans: Meeting Targets and Improving Schools'. In his discussion with LEA officials, the author documented the belief that the 'level of prescription' from central government had been too great and that this had diminished the case for local decision-making which should 'not be constrained by being tied to a DfEE-approved operational plan'.

Furthermore, it was noted by Arnold (1999) that while LEA consultation with schools might well produce local

priorities which do not match those of central government: 'Those priorities should be acted on, not downgraded or discarded because they do not match DfEE's priorities – if not, consultation is brought into disrepute and tensions arise in local partnership'. Perhaps this is why, with few exceptions, that national–local partnerships are often characterised by a focus on formal targets and measurable, hard indicators of performance, rather than on 'softer' outcomes from the breadth of partner (e.g. school) experiences.

Building on the theme of centrally-steered partnerships, Dyson *et al.* (2002) argue that LEAs play a pivotal role in facilitating and coordinating DfES-driven initiatives, especially regarding school improvement projects and funding. Such perceptions have caused Derrington (2000) and others to suggest that unless LEAs are seen to respond to local needs, as well as national priorities, genuine partnership with schools is unlikely to be achieved. Despite the critical commentary on the influence central government has on DfES–LEA partnerships, a report by The Education Network (TEN) found that such partnerships were advantageous. In TEN's 'Evaluation of New Ways of Working in LEAs' (2003), the report's authors found that the most marked educational improvements were in LEAs that were subject to intervention by the DfES. In these cases, the attention, funding and other support that was available had a significant effect on educational outcomes. However, it should be noted that in TEN's study, government intervention was confined to poorly performing LEAs and that there remains significant scope for further study before tangible benefits of central and local government partnership working are effectively illustrated.

David Miliband (2004) outlined the need to forge new relationship with schools in which DfES' and LEAs' support for secondary schools is more tightly integrated:

I want to forge a new relationship with schools in which DfES' and LEAs' support for secondary schools is more closely integrated, draws on the proven expertise of those in the field, including serving heads and leading schools and offers a substantial reduction in burdensome bidding and reporting requirements.

None of this will be simple or easy to accomplish either for the DfES or for LEAs. It will be important that our proposals are developed in close discussion with

national and local partners, particularly at headteacher and LEA level and ideas tested in practice before being developed widely.

A 'new opportunity for partnership' was very clearly spelt out by the Secretary of State in his speech to the March 2003 conference of the Association of Chief Education Officers (ACEO) in which he declared:

I want to offer a new partnership between central and local government to drive forward improvement in our schools. Some see LEAs as part of the problem rather than as part of the solution. There is now the opportunity... to prove them wrong.

(Clarke, 2003)

On 23 July 2003, Charles Clarke and Sir Jeremy Beecham made an agreement – a Statement of Intent committing DfES and local education authorities to working in partnership to achieve high level, common outcome objectives. The Statement outlines a shared vision of local and central government education aims, with a shorter-term focus on an agreed set of priorities. During the autumn term, each LEA has had the opportunity to agree an individual Compact with the DfES setting out how the LEA and DfES will work together on key local priorities. Compacts are not statutory and there is no direct link to funding – but the government's hope is that they will represent a different way of working between the LEA and the DfES, in an atmosphere of genuine dialogue, trust and support (DfES, 2004b).

6.2 Examples from LEAs

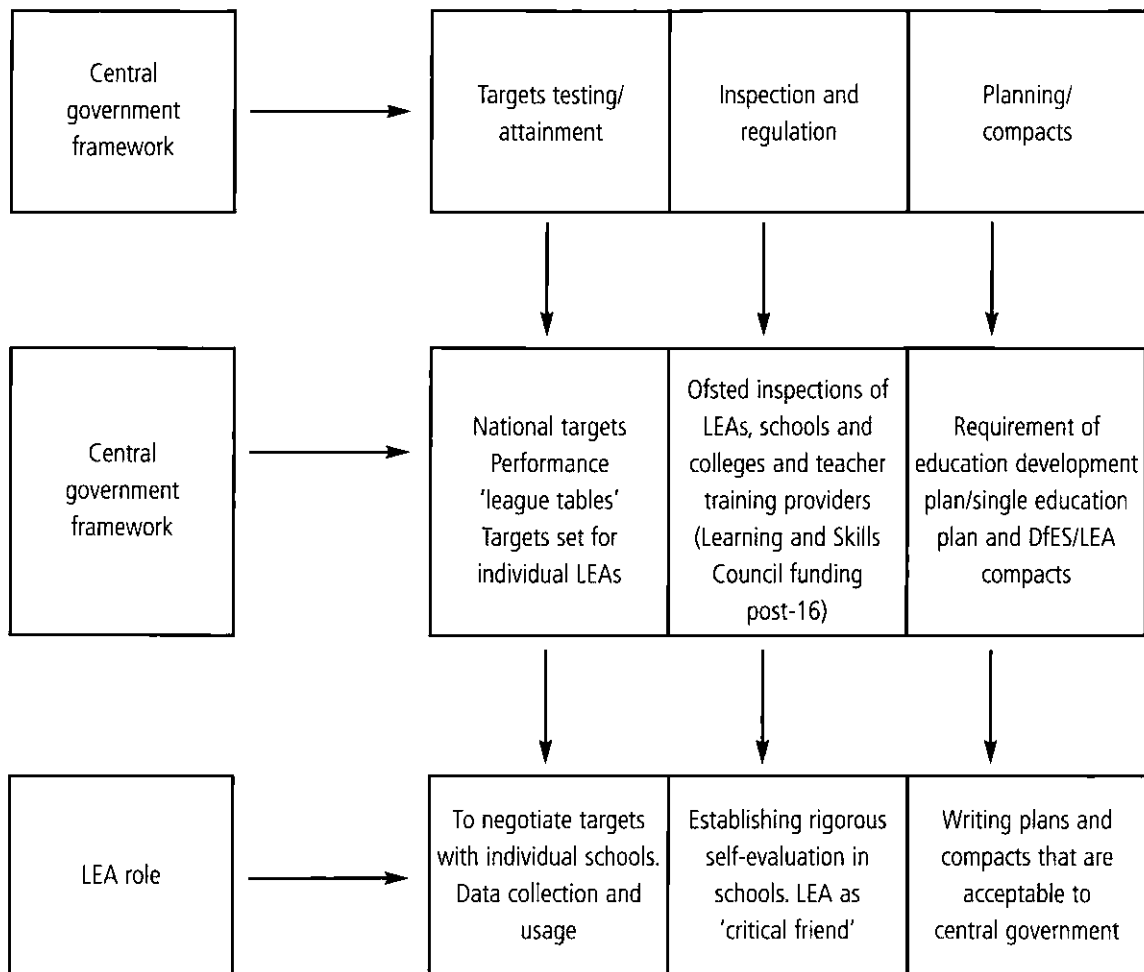
Disseminating good practice through partnership working is seen by many LEAs as a pivotal role in school improvement activity. West Sussex LEA for example has established Beacon, Specialist and Advanced Skills networks. They also run a project where three 'host' schools are paired with two or three 'cluster' schools to try and improve teaching and learning (Gaunt, 2002).

Wikeley *et al.* (2002) documented Birmingham LEA's strategy for school improvement which it has been developing since 1993. Three interlinked strategies appear to have been advantageous to the schools in the case study: specific help, networks and opportunities to join specific improvement projects. Establishing school and teacher networks was one of the goals of the LEA programme and these enabled sharing of good practice, exploration of ideas, mutual support and helpful comparisons. The success of the programme in part depended on the quality of advisers and trainers involved – they previously had been able to give a lot of time to it, but were now being expected to give more time to central initiatives such as Excellence in Cities and Education Action Zones. This example calls into question the problems of managing human resources in partnership working and the drain on local education authorities from centrally driven policies.

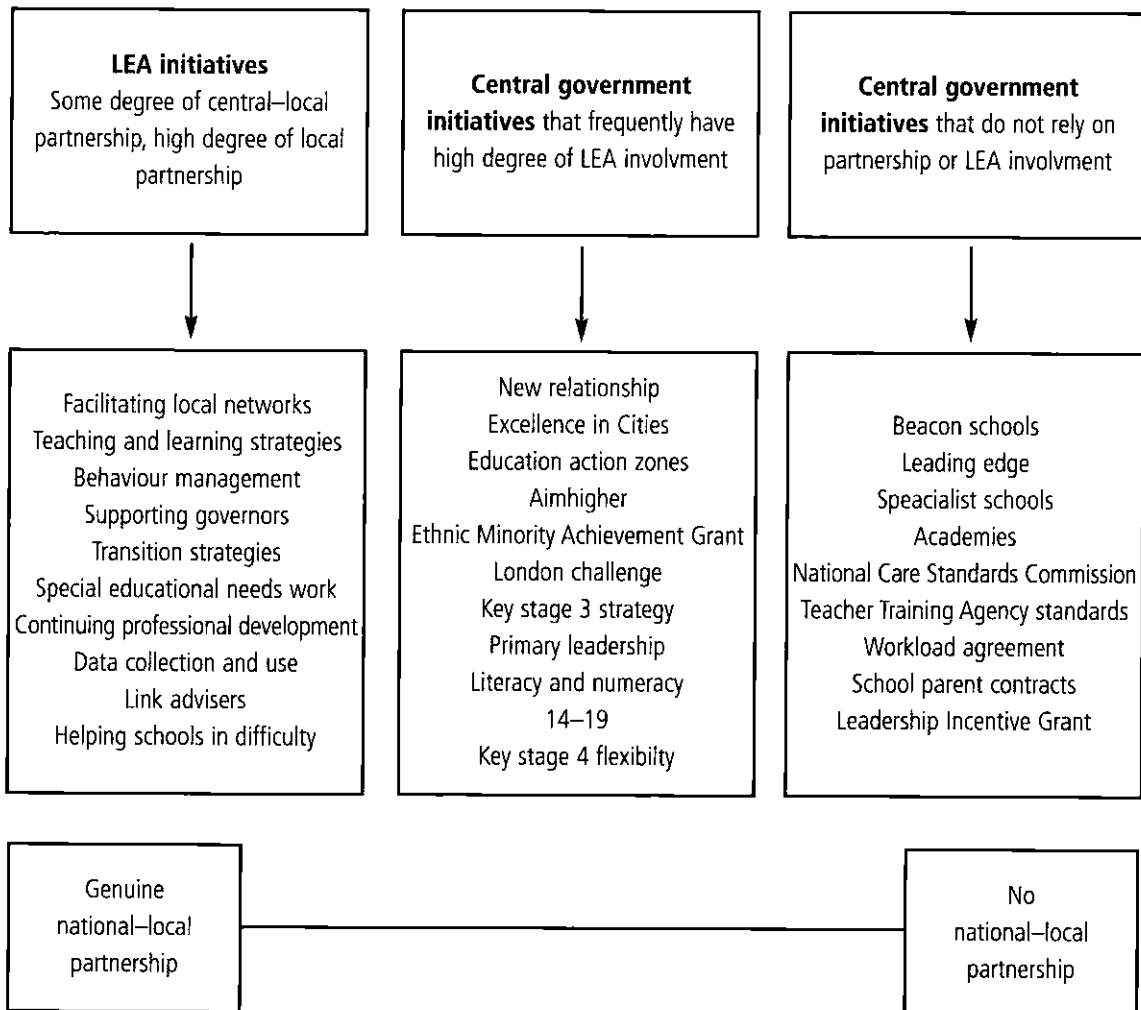
Fletcher-Campbell and Lee (2003) revealed that while LEAs were found to have a positive approach to the main national policies (e.g. Education Development Plan; Code of practice on LEA-school relations; Fair Funding and the Standards Fund), they were implementing them in the light of existing local conditions and striving to maintain those prior practices which they considered were instrumental, locally, in raising standards of achievement.

Leicester City's 'Partnership Board' is heralded as a potentially transferable model for LEA renewal, that is, capable of supporting and sustaining educational change through partnership work. David Hopkins (2002), in his presentation to the 15th International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement provided an analysis of the Partnership Board approach which involved building consensus and establishing direction both within and between the LEA and constituent schools and restructuring the authority in line with agreed vision and school improvement strategies. The creation of a Partnership Board was viewed as both a 'unique and courageous act' as it broke new ground in the approach to revival, renewal and modernisation of LEAs.

Appendix 1 The LEA role in school improvement



Appendix 2 LEAs: local and national partnership activities



Appendix 3 Literature review framework

Reference:			
Source:			
Document Type:			
Date of Review:		Reviewed By:	
Relevance to Project:	High	Medium	Low
Purpose			
Design			
Country/area			
Date(s) data collected			
Sample characteristics			
Method(s)			
Project details			
View of the issue/ Underpinning assumptions			
Key findings or key themes			
Authors' conclusions and recommendations			
Reviewer's comments			
Model of LEA working			
Links			
Usefulness to LEAs			

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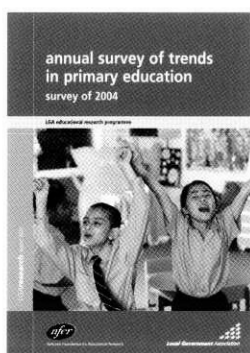
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Claire Easton, Sarah Knight and Lesley Kendall

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Mary Atkinson, Emily Lamont, Richard White, Caroline Gulliver and Kay Kinder

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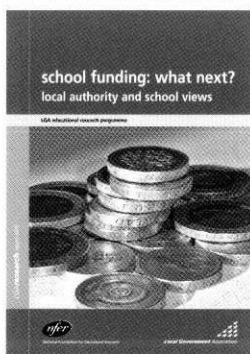
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Mary Atkinson, Emily Lamont, Caroline Gulliver, Richard White and Kay Kinder

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How do national and local government work together to raise school standards? This review of relevant literature provides an up-to-date picture of the context within which this educational priority is being implemented. The report:

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- considers what the literature says about the relative importance and effectiveness of these various roles
- examines what the literature reveals about the nature and effectiveness of national–local partnership working
- develops a series of signposts relating to the raising standards literature.

The literature is examined in detail and key findings concern:

- the national government context
- the local government context
- constraints on local education authorities
- local education authority areas of working
- partnership working.

Useful diagrams explain the LEA role in school improvement and local and national partnership activities. An extensive reference list and recommendations for further reading are included, making the report an invaluable reference tool.

The report is important reading for local authority staff, schools and policy makers concerned with raising school standards.