



Local Government Association

the recruitment, retention and training of local authority school improvement staff

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

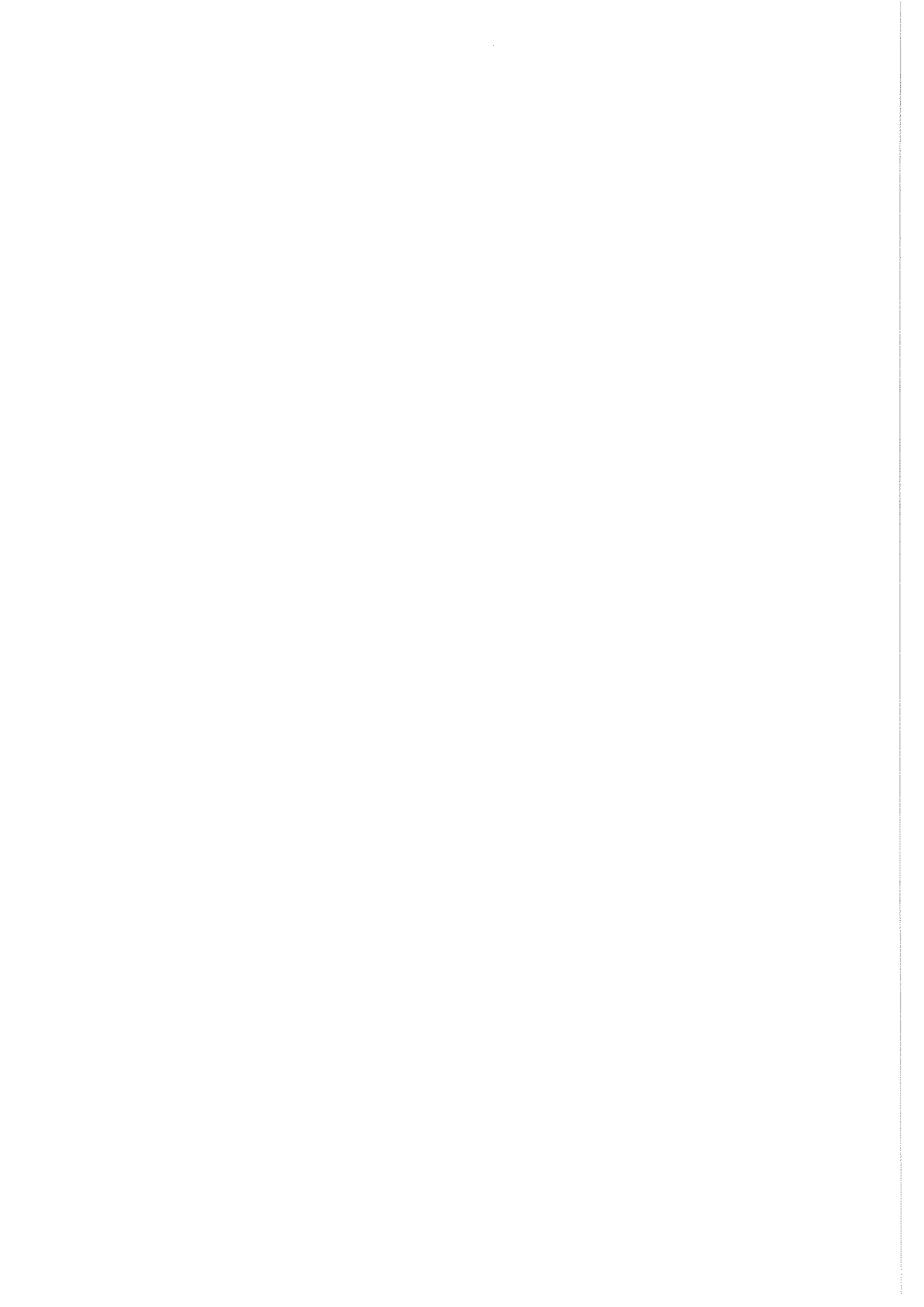


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PREFACE

This research study was conducted at the same time as an EMIE (Education Management Information Exchange) survey of LEA advisory, inspection and school improvement services. The two pieces of work approach the same topic in different ways and with different emphases, thereby complementing each other. To avoid burdening LEAs with two independent requests for information, a joint questionnaire was devised. This was sent to all 180 LEAs in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. Information from the questionnaire was selected for use in both this and the EMIE study. The EMIE report, published in July 2002, is entitled *The School Improvers* (Arnold, 2002). Following analysis of the questionnaire survey data, this study undertook 12 case studies in both English and Welsh LEAs.

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We would like thank all who contributed to this research. They gave their time generously in order to support a project in the belief that it would have valuable outcomes for others. We are most appreciative of the time given by all our questionnaire respondents and interviewees to share their perceptions, experiences and expertise of recruitment, retention and training of local authority school improvement staff.

We would like to thank the staff at EMIE for their help in managing the project: in particular, Valerie Gee and Ronald Arnold, who were our partners in this research study. Thanks are also due to the following people at NFER: Sarah Knight for her help with conducting fieldwork; Mary Hargreaves for her help with presentation of the report; Effie Sudell for administrative support; and Valerie Gee and Andy Hobson for their support and helpful comments on the draft.

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RESEARCH SUMMARY

Introduction

LEA inspection and advisory staff are a crucial element in delivering the Government's school improvement agenda. Yet concerns have been expressed that LEAs are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain their school improvement staff. This research project set out to investigate these issues, to document the strategies being adopted by LEAs to overcome their staffing difficulties and to identify examples of best practice.

Key findings

What are the requirements of school improvement work?

- ◆ LEA school improvement managers felt that the skills, experience and knowledge required of school improvement staff had changed significantly since the implementation of the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act. There was general agreement that school improvement staff now needed to exercise a greater range of skills during their contacts with schools.
- ◆ There was a new emphasis on: skills of data analysis and interpretation; the need to provide challenge and support to schools; and assisting schools with target setting.
- ◆ Good interpersonal skills were considered to be vital for school improvement staff to pursue their role effectively. Headteachers particularly valued advisers who put people at their ease, were good listeners and displayed integrity and commitment in their role.
- ◆ Headteachers felt strongly that advisory staff were more credible if they had had recent experience of headship.

Are LEAs facing recruitment difficulties?

- ◆ Staff recruitment was clearly a concern for managers of school improvement services. Thirty-nine of the 42 managers who completed the questionnaire said that they had experienced recruitment difficulties in the past three years.
- ◆ The main factors considered to be affecting recruitment were salary levels and salary differentials compared with senior managers in schools. Other factors affecting recruitment related to negative perceptions of the status, security and career structure offered by school improvement work.

- ◆ Recruitment difficulties experienced in the advisory service were linked to and influenced by difficulties in recruiting people to leadership roles in schools.
- ◆ There were particular recruitment difficulties for local authorities in areas of high-cost housing, in rural areas requiring substantial travelling between schools, and for Welsh authorities seeking Welsh-speaking staff.

Which strategies are used to recruit school improvement staff?

- ◆ The key strategy adopted by authorities faced with recruitment difficulties was to draw on other sources of staffing such as independent consultants and private providers. Authorities were also using school-focused strategies, such as the Beacon Schools initiative, as a means of disseminating good practice. Financial incentives were also used to attract staff.
- ◆ LEAs sought to attract staff by highlighting their credentials as good employers, such as a commitment to achieving a work–life balance, offering staff development opportunities and effective teamwork. They also drew attention to the positive benefits of living and working in a particular area.
- ◆ LEAs had to be prepared to operate flexibly and to negotiate the terms and conditions of their employment contracts. Some were offering secondments, rather than new contracts, in order to ensure that headteachers would not have to take a salary cut.

Are LEAs facing retention difficulties?

- ◆ Retention difficulties were acknowledged, but were not considered to be as acute as those faced in recruitment. Half of the 42 managers responding to the questionnaire reported difficulties in retaining staff during the past three years.
- ◆ The main reasons given for staff leaving were: promotion within the authority; leaving for a headship; or moving to another authority.
- ◆ The case study work indicated that ‘retention’ may be an outmoded concept. In particular, the use of short-term secondments for specific purposes meant that people were not expected to stay long in the role.
- ◆ Despite retention concerns, several of the advisers interviewed emphasised the potential for job satisfaction inherent in the school improvement role. The motivating factors included the feeling that they were able to make a difference and the privilege of gaining a much broader experience of the education system.
- ◆ For people recruited from schools, the transition to local authority work could prove problematic at first. Some authorities had implemented strategies to support new staff during this time.

What are the training and development needs for school improvement work?

- ◆ About two-thirds of the managers responding to the survey said that there was a need to retrain existing school improvement staff to enable them to keep up with recent developments.
- ◆ Staff development usually included five elements: induction; skills development; general awareness-raising and updating; the identification of individual development needs (primarily through appraisal); and opportunities for development inherent in the work itself.
- ◆ Most authorities (37) operated a performance management system, although this was not normally related to pay.
- ◆ Participation in nationally accredited training schemes was perceived to be particularly valuable and to bring greater credibility to the individuals concerned.

Implications for the future

This study has confirmed that LEAs are facing difficulties in recruiting school improvement staff. Given that school leadership and expert teaching are the preferred sources of school improvement staff, it is difficult for authorities to offer sufficiently attractive pay packages or confident career opportunities. It is also clear that local authority recruitment of school improvement staff is closely linked with the recruitment of schoolteachers and headteachers. It therefore seems likely that LEAs will continue to face difficulties in recruiting sufficient and suitable staff as long as these pay differentials and national teacher shortages prevail. Nevertheless, school improvement staff attested to the intrinsic rewards of their work, and heads spoke of their appreciation of a difficult job done well.

At the same time, strategic flexibility, maximising opportunities presented by national initiatives and responding to local need, were evident in the most confident of local authorities.

Recommendations

The work of school improvement has become complex, strategically and practically. Although this study focused upon the work of local authorities, the suggestions for improvements do not lie within LEAs alone. They require a synergy between national, local and individual career development and strategy, in order to develop a system of career fluidity. These recommendations include:

- ◆ Integration of national policies aimed at the recruitment of teachers, headteachers and LEA school improvement staff and those recruited through the national strategies to raise standards of achievement of pupils, students and adults.

- ◆ National training and development programmes which recognise both the common and the distinctive aspects of school improvement work within curriculum development and educational leadership.
- ◆ Consideration of alternative models of professional practice, which include school- and local authority-based elements of 'fitness to practise': a complement to current development of national standards for school improvement work.
- ◆ Local performance management systems which include plans for career development, career change and transition as well as for induction, evaluation and professional development within the job.

About the study

This research formed part of the LGA's Educational Research Programme. The research team sent a questionnaire survey to the heads of school improvement in all 180 local education in Great Britain, excluding Scotland. The survey was sent out in autumn 2001 and achieved a response of 22 per cent. In view of this low response rate, it would be unwise to assume that the responses are necessarily representative of all authorities.

The research team conducted case study visits to 12 English and Welsh LEAs during the spring and early summer of 2002. These authorities were selected from the survey responses and also as a result of direct contact. The sample reflected a range of different circumstances, including geographical location and type of authority across England and Wales. The case study sample comprised seven English counties, three London boroughs and two Welsh authorities. A total of 47 interviews were carried out with school improvement staff and a further 25 with headteachers. In addition, three interviews were conducted with managers of private sector services.

PART ONE: THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction

This research study was born out of concerns expressed across local education authorities that, just at the time when their responsibilities for promoting school improvement had been formalised and made a statutory duty, they were experiencing difficulties in recruiting and retaining the school improvement staff who would be needed to carry out the work. In addition, with changes in the skills base required to carry out school improvement work, the credibility of school improvement staff was more likely to be questioned, thus lending support to the argument that training and continuing professional development activities should play a central role in the working lives of school improvement staff.

This study, undertaken between April 2001 and May 2002 as part of the Local Government Association's Educational Research Programme, sets out to address these issues and to provide empirical evidence with which to open up an informed policy debate. It covers English and Welsh local authorities. The research explores the claim that these local authorities have been experiencing problems in recruiting and retaining school improvement staff, considers potential solutions to these problems, and suggests recommendations for best practice in these areas. In addition, it provides examples of good practice in provision for continuing professional development (CPD). This is important for two reasons: first, in order to illustrate the role that CPD plays in the maintenance of suitably skilled and professionally credible school improvement staff; and secondly, to consider whether good CPD, which clearly provides members of staff with an ever increasing skills base, can help to retain good school improvement staff.

The study was conducted against a policy background in Wales of *Building Excellent Schools Together* (GB. House of Commons, 1997) and the School Standards and Framework Act (GB. Statutes, 1998), which gave focus to all education authorities' responsibilities for school improvement. Arising from the Act, the Code of Practice on LEA-School relations (DfEE, 2001) outlined the Government's expectations regarding local authorities' contact with schools. A key concept contained within the Code was that of inverse proportionality, whereby local authority school improvement teams were expected to provide differentiated levels of intervention, challenge and support to those schools most in need. Meanwhile the policy paper *The Role of the Local Education Authority in School Education* (DfEE, 2000) established the respective responsibilities of schools and local education authorities within the wider context of local government modernisation. During this period, a process was begun to generate a set of national standards and competencies against which school improvement teams could be evaluated (DfEE, 2000). It also took place at a time of great public

debate about teacher and headteacher recruitment difficulties. On the eve of this study's completion, the OFSTED report, *Recruitment and Retention of Teachers and Headteachers: Strategies Adopted by LEAs* (2002), was published. During the course of this research study, the policy background was itself evolving, especially in the area of Best Value, with, for example, consultation beginning on a process of Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), (Audit Commission, 2002) to bring together a range of inspection and audit of local government services. The policy background to the study is summarised in Appendix 1 of this report.

The study also draws upon a range of mainly empirical research which has monitored and examined the effects of policy changes upon school improvement work. A number of the key themes raised by these studies provide a useful framework from which to begin an exploration of the difficulties associated with recruiting and retaining school improvement staff:

- i. the shift in responsibility for raising standards of achievement in schools from LEAs to schools themselves, giving LEA staff the statutory responsibility to challenge schools to improve and to support those which need help (Ainscow *et al.*, 2000).
- ii. a number of ambiguities surrounding inspectors' and advisers' status, including: the tensions between schools' expectations of LEA school improvement staff, the particular local circumstances in which they operate and the expectations of central government (Ainscow *et al.*, 2000).
- iii. the nature of the skills balance required to provide both challenge and support, involving multiple roles and expectations (Derrington, 2000)
- iv. the perceptions of LEA advisory and school improvement work as lacking a career structure and opportunities for both existing LEA staff and for potential recruits currently working in schools (Ainscow and Howes, 2001; Bird, 2000; Derrington, 2000)
- v. the effects of Fair Funding upon LEA and schools' expectations of each other (Derrington, 2000)
- vi. the factors internal to advisory and school improvement teams which are key to high morale, successful working (Ainscow and Howes, 2001) and the 'communities of practice' theory developed by Wenger *et al.*
- vii. the claim that best practice in school improvement work should be 'context-specific' in order to recognise that what fits is not necessarily what works (Harris, 2000b)
- viii. the wider economic and social shifts under way in contemporary Western society (Beck, 1992; Felstead and Jewson, 1999).

A summary of relevant research is provided in Appendix 2 of this report.

1.2 The aims and design of the study

As outlined above, the project aimed:

- ◆ to identify and quantify the difficulties being faced in relation to the recruitment and retention of local authority school improvement staff
- ◆ to focus upon the strategies being adopted within LEAs to overcome these problems (including the provision of training and development opportunities for staff)
- ◆ to offer examples of best practice in the recruitment, retention and training of school improvement staff.

To do this, the research adopted a methodology which incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methods:

- ◆ **a literature review:** to provide an exploration and overview of current debates, issues and policies surrounding school improvement work, including discussion of the status, roles and experiences of inspection and advisory staff, and to inform the development of a questionnaire and case study interview schedules
- ◆ **a local education authority questionnaire** survey to be completed by chief inspectors: to ascertain whether problems in the recruitment and retention of inspection and advisory staff were indeed a reality, why these problems were perceived to exist and whether, in the light of these problems, any particular strategies were being adopted. The survey was designed to provide an LEA management perspective of school improvement recruitment, retention and training issues
- ◆ **12 case studies:** to provide qualitative information at a local level, with particular focus upon successful and innovative practice in context. The case studies provided LEA management, headteacher and school improvement practitioner perspectives.

The report sets its analysis within the context of national developments, different local authority circumstances and within a wider contextual framework relating to the world of work. More information can be found about the research design and methodology in Appendix 3 of this report.

1.3 The structure of the report

The review of empirical research summarised in Appendix 2 of this report reveals that there is still much to be learned about current practices and experiences in recruiting, retaining and developing school improvement teams. The body of this report explores these issues further. Part Two addresses the first two research aims by identifying and quantifying the difficulties faced in relation to recruitment and retention of local authority school improvement staff. It continues with a consideration of the various strategies adopted within LEAs to overcome these problems, including the use of training and professional development activities. In Part Three, the

analysis moves on to address the third aim of the research by drawing together examples of best practice in the recruitment, retention and training of school improvement staff and considering recommendations for future recruitment, retention and training strategies.

Each section of the report outlines first the findings of the study, followed by a summary and discussion of the main issues arising in that section. The conclusions and recommendations in Part Three provide a distillation of these.

However, before this can take place, it is necessary to outline recent changes in the skills and roles that school improvement staff require to perform their work: changes which, our review of existing empirical research suggests, may prove a contributory factor affecting the current recruitment and retention difficulties experienced by local authorities.

PART TWO : THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

2.1 Changes in school improvement work

While earlier surveys of LEA advisory and inspection services conducted by the Education Management Information Exchange (see Dean, 1993; Dean, 1994; Mann, 1995; Hendy, 1999) have charted changes in the role of advisers and inspectors over the past decade, our research demonstrates an acceleration of this process of change. For example, the LEA questionnaire survey showed that, while the role of local authorities with regard to school improvement has been defined in legislation, the ways in which those local authorities organised themselves to meet their responsibilities varied widely. The questionnaire asked respondents to indicate which post titles were used in their local education authorities for those employees whose work with individual schools was focused upon advice, support, inspection and school improvement. Forty-four different job titles were being used by respondent LEAs for the roles carried out by their school improvement teams. This range displayed both contextual and conceptual differences in the way the work was being organised. The most commonly used titles were *assistant/deputy director*, *chief adviser/inspector*, *general/link/attached adviser* and *consultant* (for the national strategies). There were, however, many permutations of these titles, in addition to a range of titles particular to individual authorities.

The boundaries of school improvement teams were also defined flexibly across the case study LEAs: not surprising within the context of school improvement resources led by the Priorities of each LEA's Education Development Plan (EDP). No consistency emerged about which roles were included within the school improvement brief. For example, in one large shire authority a team of six attached inspectors worked in a team separate from its advisory service and consultants appointed through the national strategies for literacy and numeracy. This team of six held a tightly defined school improvement role, focused upon target setting and support to schools in inverse proportion to need. In another, equally large, shire authority, the attached inspectors held a very wide remit, including the provision of personnel and financial advice to the schools' management teams and school-focused training for governors.

Owing to the wide variety of titles given to, and roles performed by, members of school improvement teams, it is necessary to define the parameters of what we mean by *school improvement staff*. In this report, the term *school improvement staff* is used to include all advisers, inspectors, national strategy consultants, school improvement consultants and others employed by local education authorities to carry out school improvement responsibilities: as defined within their education development plans and within the remit of the national strategies for literacy, numeracy and key stage 3. Those who

provided a management perspective of school improvement, such as chief inspectors, chief advisers and heads of school improvement, will be referred to as *school improvement managers*. Individual school improvement team members will be referred to as *advisers*. However, where illustrative quotations are provided, the job titles used by the source authority have been retained. Generalisations in the text refer to themes, issues and ideas which emerged from a number of case study authorities from both England and Wales. Where distinct from the English authorities, the Welsh perspective has been reported separately. Other areas of the United Kingdom are not covered within this report.

2.1.1 LEA survey responses

The LEA survey questionnaire asked for information about the changes in skills, experience and knowledge that had been necessary to meet the requirements of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (GB. Statutes, 1998).

Most (36 out of 42) of the school improvement managers who responded agreed that, since the Act came into force, the processes of school improvement had required significantly different skills, experiences and knowledge from those required of advisory and inspection teams in the past. Thirty-five of the respondents gave details of the key ways in which skills, knowledge or experiences have changed. A need for improved data analysis and interpretation skills headed the list, followed (in order of frequency) by: the need for a greater focus on challenge and support; the move away from subject support/advice to generic knowledge; the need for more accurate target setting; and a greater need for intervention. The following statements, included in the questionnaire returns, clearly outline these various changes:

Advisers [have] needed to increase their capacity to interrogate school data and information, and to challenge schools that are increasingly autonomous.

[There has been a] move away from subject support/advice to generic knowledge of whole-school improvement, coupled with firm challenge for schools/headteachers [sic]. Data handling [has been] increasingly significant – advisers need to be able to handle and use efficiently.

A vital component of school improvement skills relates to the identification, dissemination and sharing of good practice. The school improvement officer/team also have to have an eye and knowledge for the development of a raft of new initiatives, which keep coming from the national agenda.

The survey sought information about the changes in skills, experience and knowledge necessary to meet the new statutory requirements. This may explain why, despite the fact that the case study authorities (reported on below) placed emphasis on interpersonal skills as a necessary complement to the new skills of challenge and target setting, less reference was made to these skills in questionnaire responses.

2.1.2 Case study responses

In the case study authorities, there was also clear recognition of the changing nature of local authority advisory and inspection work. In particular, case study participants cited the Government's requirement that local authorities carry out a more focused role of challenge and support, in line with the responsibilities outlined within the School Standards and Framework Act (GB. Statutes, 1998) to raise standards of achievement. Nevertheless, views about this role, and the activities arising from it, ranged widely, as did definitions of which local authority staff came within the school improvement remit. The perceptions of school improvement managers, advisers and headteachers about whether the new role requires a different set of skills, knowledge and experience from those required in the past also ranged widely.

Changing roles, activities and relationships

The management perspective provided by chief education officers, chief inspectors, chief advisers and heads of school improvement supported the survey findings about the changing demands on advisers and inspectors in the school improvement role. The changes highlighted most frequently, within the context of a new culture of accountability, were in the areas of performance data analysis, target setting and the provision of both challenge and support (as appropriate to the needs of individual schools) in order that the schools themselves might raise standards of achievement. The need to operate within a context of competition and the consequent need to be aware of commercial sensitivity also featured. These changes were generally said to have brought greater rigour and 'sharpness' to the role, but at the same time new role tensions had been introduced within a market economy. These changes were also seen to be complemented by a greater focus on the evidence provided by research: particularly that arising from central government analysis of performance and the OFSTED system of school inspection. One school improvement manager referred to an increased level of accountability, accompanied by the use of measurement by means of league tables and performance management of individuals:

[In the past]...there wasn't the close connection between the performance of advisers and school performance, but there is now. So the accountability is much.... sharper, much more focused and much more measurable.

In Wales, the school improvement culture, as a result of policy decisions taken by the Welsh assembly, was perceived overall to be less threatening and more supportive than that which has developed in England. Even so, school improvement managers were aware of the pressures to shift toward the challenge and target setting model:

I think somewhere in the future we're going to have to be clearer; I think the Government in England certainly sees a pretty sharp distinction between challenge and advice and support. I think that's a slightly artificial divide, because where does evaluation begin and end and then where does advice and support begin and end?

This manager had concerns about the Draft National Standards for Individual School Improvement Staff and Providers of School Improvement Services (DfES, 2001) and the proposals within the document which would change school improvement teams' approaches to service provision:

The other areas that we'll have to respond to are the proposals that the DfES has in England, although it is very much being driven ahead at the moment considering the context in England and it's not been sufficiently responsive to the context in Wales, which is different. It's the notion of accrediting school improvement services and individual school improvement officers. There will be a need to demonstrate that we provide a service of sufficient quality, that we can be successfully accredited.

The headteachers interviewed in England, who represented primary and secondary schools and a range of overall school performance, were also clear about the changing nature of local authority advisory and inspection work. Their perceptions of the nature of these changes coincided closely with those of the school improvement managers and individual advisers. However, their evaluation of the changes ranged from welcoming the rigour of school improvement to challenging whether the new agenda matched the real needs of schools. One secondary headteacher in a London borough acknowledged that the rigorous aspects of the school improvement role were necessary, stating that '*...the Director and Chief Inspector take no prisoners, but that's what's needed here*'.

In assuming the role of 'critical friend', as a result of LEAs' reinforced school improvement responsibilities, not all advisers were seen to generate the open and trusting relationships that headteachers felt were essential to creating the optimum conditions for change and development. Some headteachers argued that the resultant rigour and accountability made them wary of the information they passed on to their link advisers. As one primary headteacher stated:

I used to be much freer about my honest interpretation of this school with my adviser. In recent years, as they have focused more and more on accountability, I have found myself in the position where I feel duty bound to my staff, my governors, my school community to 'present' my school to the adviser.

These sentiments were echoed in the discussion with another primary headteacher who told us, '*Even if they call it an advisory service, it is not an advisory service... they are definitely feared*'.

Regarding the new requirement for inverse proportionality, successful schools frequently lamented the lack of contact with an attached or link adviser/inspector. This was emphasised by one secondary headteacher in a shire authority who saw external challenge as essential for all: '*Good schools also need to improve.*' A primary headteacher in another shire authority asked: '*Are different skills needed [to produce] an excellent school from a*

very good school?’, and would have liked to call more upon the local authority staff to help him develop an excellent school. Others perceived the concept of inverse proportionality as flawed because it required, not preventative and formative support, but action after problems had developed:

School improvement should be to help the school to improve, not just about firefighting. This should include help with strategic planning; monitoring and checking; giving specific advice particularly about personnel matters; ongoing support whatever the circumstances; and giving support to the head.

While being theoretically possible for good schools to purchase support and consultancy, several headteachers in the case study authorities believed that little quality-assured support existed in their areas outside that provided by their local authorities. This perception about lack of choice was most marked in rural and coastal areas.

The principles of inverse proportionality were seen in a more negative light by headteachers when combined with a range of funding issues, which were seen to skew or exacerbate the availability of school improvement staff to meet schools’ needs at an appropriate time. The funding issues were cited, for example, as provision of school improvement services for buyback; differences between school budgets owing to historical funding patterns; and local political decisions to spend on education less than the Government’s indicative allowance by means of the Standard Spending Assessment (SSA). However, few clear trends emerged regarding the key issues surrounding inverse proportionality and the resources available at local level to support schools in raising standards. For example, in one shire authority, which did not operate a school improvement buyback system, all three headteachers interviewed felt that there were insufficient local authority staff overall to provide the level of contact and support they would like. Headteachers here frequently mentioned their desire for a wider definition of school support than could be provided by the school improvement team alone, or even the whole advisory and inspection service. One said: *‘This LEA doesn’t have enough officers or inspectors to cover the number of schools, so individuals are hard pressed.’*

In other instances, it was the need for the team to earn income which was seen by headteachers to detract from their school improvement focus, or, more precisely, the school improvement focus of their individual schools. This tension was felt most keenly in small LEAs where individual advisers carried multiple responsibilities. It was interesting to note, however, that the responses by headteachers about lack of school improvement staff availability did not show clear perception trends overall between large and small LEAs, urban and rural, or new and long-standing authorities.

Organisational systems and requirements notwithstanding, several headteachers were quick to highlight the professional support and clarity of purpose provided by their link advisers. In the words of a primary headteacher whose school had recently come out of special measures:

When the chips are down and you are in the middle of the week from hell, she seems to have this ability to put a search light at the end of this dark tunnel ... There is no-one else professionally who can help me in the way she has done.

Changing skills

What became evident in discussions about the changing roles of school improvement staff was that skills and personal qualities were central to this change process. Headteachers made distinctions between the professional knowledge and skills required by a successful adviser; their interpersonal skills, such as being good listeners; and their personal qualities, such as integrity, loyalty and steadfastness in the face of difficulties. These skills and qualities were always valued.

Headteachers also made reference to the personal qualities of advisers they respected. One primary headteacher in a London borough spoke of the selflessness of her school's attached inspector, who would respond immediately when required to help at times of difficulty, knowing that this action would mean many hours of extra work in the evenings to catch up with tasks which had been deferred. A secondary headteacher in a shire county spoke of the steadfastness of a subject inspector who had supported him throughout capability proceedings, despite personal verbal attack. Another secondary headteacher in London spoke of the ease of relationship with her attached inspector, which, she believed, came not just from the inspector's knowledge, personal qualities and interpersonal skills, but also from similarities in background: *'Personally we are of a similar age and outlook, so there is an element of friendship and trust.'* She believed that this congruence of experience enabled a headteacher – inspector relationship which was both challenging and rigorous, as it was based in shared experience and trust.

Headteachers were also clear about the professional skills their LEA school improvement staff needed in order to be successful overall in their work. As one secondary headteacher in a shire authority outlined:

Inspectors need a knowledge and understanding of standards in their subject area. They need a reservoir of experience and good practice for the different elements of good-quality teaching in their subject. It is very important, particularly regarding performance issues, [that] they have the ability to give an independent view of the quality of teaching, with recommendations for a package of support in order to improve.

He continued by emphasising that knowledge and experience alone were not sufficient. Interpersonal skills are needed in order that headteachers take notice of their knowledge and experience: *'They need high-quality interpersonal skills, to command respect and so [that] headteachers value their input.'*

This was supported by the views of advisers, and their managers, who recognised that the range of skills necessary had increased in number and complexity in recent years. As one adviser in a shire authority stated:

It's the depth and range of skills now which are so much stronger than they used to be. I think people had a narrower range of skills and ... strategies that they were using, and now it's much broader.

Advisers and headteachers were in agreement, then, that the new skills of school improvement need to be complemented by the key interpersonal skills which have probably always been important to success in the role. In the words of a senior inspector working in a London borough: *'Having any inspectors in the room puts teachers under pressure... Inspectors need to have a talent for setting people at ease.'* This point was also made by a primary inspector in a large shire county:

You can go in and observe a lesson and you could find 100 faults, but it is about finding 100 strengths and picking up a couple of faults that might improve ...some [colleagues] are very confrontational. It is about intervention. And straightaway you get a barrier.

In support of this view, a new adviser, recruited directly from primary headship, stated that many of the skills, qualities and areas of expertise needed to carry out the school improvement role successfully were those which had always been crucial. However, what was new was the need to bring many of them to bear at the same time and to be effective in a relatively short time: *'A range of tools and strategies are needed to call upon: mentor, adviser, coach, critical friend, and they all require slightly different skills and techniques.'* In addition, he outlined the communication skills required in order to develop quickly a trusting but rigorously challenging relationship with heads:

Listening to understand, active listening, affirmation techniques, the ability to synthesise key points and reflect back. You need to work for mutual benefit: win-win. And you need the skills to empower people according to their own goals, accompanied by an ability to sense their real-time, active commitment to their own goals.

Overall, in contrast to managers' responses to the questionnaire survey, the advisers interviewed emphasised the interpersonal skills needed to carry out their work rather than knowledge, experience or personal qualities. Important in the past, they saw these interpersonal skills as increasingly central to the new and complex nature of their role, which now encompassed challenge, intervention and support. Interpersonal skills were crucial if they were to persuade headteachers and teachers of the need to change and to help them gain the confidence necessary to try new ways of achieving their aims and targets. This emphasis upon interpersonal skills coincided with those of NAEIAC in its development of a *National Framework of Competencies for Educational Advisers, Inspectors and Consultants* (NAEIAC, 2001).

For a secondary headteacher in a London borough, the skill of mediating between Government requirements and the daily realities of managing her school were also very important. This skill had become more crucial in recent years, she believed, because of the national focus upon curriculum, pedagogy and standards of achievement in the light of the national inclusion agenda and the day-to-day challenges presented by the behaviour of a significant minority of pupils in her school. She spoke highly of her attached inspector, who was able to help find a way through the legalities of pupil exclusions in a way that supported the school and the headteacher to find the best possible solution for the individual pupils. She felt she needed someone who had a good grasp of the legal situation, but who also understood where it might be possible to bend the rules for the benefit of individual pupils:

It's no use someone just giving you the legal line. You need empathy, understanding... someone who knows the appropriate place of rules.

The majority of headteachers also took a broad view of the components of school improvement. They recognised a need for advice about personnel and legal issues from their LEA, as a complement to that relating to curriculum, leadership and management. One primary headteacher, for example, was particularly impressed by the morale-boosting support he received from the chief education officer and a number of other senior officers when his school was subject to serious flooding. He viewed their personal visits to see him and the school staff as important as the prompt advice received from the personnel, legal and buildings staff of the local authority.

Some headteachers regretted the current emphasis of the school improvement role on performance analysis and target setting, as they felt this negatively affected the interpersonal and supportive nature of their relationship with their advisory team. In the words of one primary headteacher:

It has become much more number oriented than person oriented. C will come in and say, 'We need to look at your targets' ... not 'How are your staff?' or 'How are things going?'

Interestingly, in line with national policy on the need for school autonomy and self-managing schools, many headteachers, across the case study sample, did not focus upon LEA staff as the centre of school improvement initiatives. They felt that schools and school staff were the locus for raising standards of achievement and that the responsibilities for doing so rested with them.

At the same time, the issue of credibility was high on their agenda, which in turn held powerful implications for the recruitment and retention of LEA school improvement staff. As Kouzes and Posner (1993) have outlined, credibility is a concept closely linked with that of leadership. The case studies of this research revealed that headteachers required leadership qualities from their LEA school improvement staff: dynamic leadership

qualities which established professional relationships, which provided service and which were embedded in shared and recognisable values. The case study respondents also stated that school management culture continues to be one which invariably demands that these leadership qualities have developed within an educational, and usually a school, culture. In short, recent headship experience was high on the list of qualities headteachers believed their link or attached advisers should possess. Within this context, it therefore becomes clear that the recruitment and retention of LEA school improvement staff cannot be separated from wider problems associated with the recruitment and retention of school-based staff, especially those in senior management positions. As one school improvement manager in a southern authority explained, it had not been possible to recruit a numeracy adviser for the past year because of the general shortage of mathematics teachers in secondary schools.

2.1.3 Summary and discussion

There have clearly been changes in the role of school improvement within the definition of LEAs' responsibilities introduced by recent Government legislation, particularly those of challenge and support: that is, the practical activities associated with accountability. Within the roles of challenge, intervention and support, all participants agreed upon the need for the acquisition of new skills in the activities of performance data analysis, target setting and support to schools in raising standards of achievement, according to the principles of inverse proportionality.

There was also a measure of agreement that advisers now need a more secure understanding of managing the school as a dynamic organisation, although this was counterbalanced by an appreciation by headteachers of advisers' current curriculum knowledge and understanding of curriculum-specific standards.

There also emerged clear agreement that, to be successful, advisers need to bring to their role a complex set of interpersonal skills and personal qualities. There was less agreement about whether these interpersonal skills and personal qualities had been redefined by the wider political contexts of accountability and the redefinition of LEAs' responsibilities for school improvement, or whether they have always been necessary. It was generally agreed, however, that the need to bring to bear, simultaneously, a wider spectrum of interpersonal skills, and for them to be effective within relatively short timescales, was a new feature of school improvement work.

Relationships have also changed in the execution of the new roles and responsibilities, but perception of these changes is not consistent: some headteachers welcomed the 'critical friend' more than others. LEAs across both England and Wales defined the boundaries of the school improvement role differently: either accentuating the elements of challenge or those of support; either welcoming the greater autonomy expected of schools to make choices about the support they required or regretting the diminishing

levels of contact with advisers. As important to developing relationships between school improvement teams and schools were questions of credibility and leadership: particularly those arising from experience of an educational, and usually a school, culture.

It is clear that there have been changes in roles, skills, activities and relationships, but the distinction between these in practice was not always easy to define, there being a synergy between them. However, having established some of the shifts and reinterpretations of skills and roles that advisers and their school improvement managers require to perform their work, it is now possible to move on to address directly the first two aims of the research. To recap, these are:

- ◆ to identify and quantify the difficulties being faced in relation to the recruitment and retention of local authority school improvement staff
- ◆ to focus upon the strategies being adopted within LEAs to overcome these problems (including the provision of training and development opportunities for staff).

The following section of the report focuses first on recruitment difficulties and the strategies being adopted to overcome these. The analysis considers in addition whether recruitment difficulties are influenced by the global context (the changing nature of work and employment in western society), the national context (changing nature of school improvement work as outlined above) and the local circumstances in which they occur, and reflects on the factors that our review of existing empirical research suggested may contribute towards the current recruitment and retention difficulties experienced by local authorities.

2.2 Recruitment of school improvement staff

2.2.1 Evidence of recruitment difficulties

The issues surrounding recruitment of school improvement staff proved to be the cornerstone of this research study, creating the contexts for retention of staff and for approaches to training and development. Perceptions of the new elements of school improvement work and those regarding adviser credibility, explored in the last section of the report, also proved to be central to the case study definitions of recruitment difficulties.

LEA survey responses

The LEA survey questionnaire asked school improvement managers whether their authority had experienced any recruitment difficulties since September 1998 (i.e. during the three years since the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 came into force). If so, they were asked to indicate what they believed to be the main contributory factors and to describe briefly the ways in which their authority had addressed, or planned to address, such recruitment difficulties.

Recruitment was clearly a concern for many respondents. Thirty-eight of the 42 managers who completed the questionnaire indicated that they had experienced difficulties in recruiting suitable staff to carry out school improvement work during the last three years. Indeed, 32 authorities stated that there had been a general lack of applications for advertised posts, and similar numbers indicated that many of the applications they had received showed little evidence of suitable experience, skills or potential.

When asked to say what, in their opinion, they believed were the main factors that had led to their authorities' recruitment difficulties, the 35 authorities cited the level of salary offered. Other reasons, each given by just under half of respondents, were poor conditions of service and negative perceptions of the career structure in school improvement work.

Case study responses

In line with the findings of the questionnaire survey, school improvement managers and advisers in England generally reported difficulties in recruiting staff with appropriate skills, experience and expertise. The main difficulties cited were that advertisements attracted only small number of applicants, those who applied had unsuitable expertise, and re-advertising had been necessary in order to attract the right candidate. The difficulty of finding the right person for the job was felt most acutely in LEAs wishing to attract individuals from groups under-represented in their teams, such as ethnic minorities. There were also particular challenges in areas of high-cost housing. It was believed potential candidates were put off applying, or were withdrawing from the interview process, when they discovered the true costs of living in certain areas.

School improvement managers, particularly from LEAs in the south of England, reported being affected by headhunting, either from other LEAs or from private companies. Some school improvement services saw their neighbouring authorities as direct competitors, while others saw competition as a national issue, because there were insufficient people available to meet national staffing needs. Some made particular reference to the private sector, which was considered to be capable of enticing colleagues with the promise of higher salaries.

Interestingly, a contrasting situation was reported in two Welsh case study authorities, reflected also in two English rural shire counties, where the relatively low cost of living was seen as attractive, especially in areas considered pleasant places in which to live.

In one of the Welsh authorities it was reported that fewer problems were experienced when recruiting consultants on a limited fixed-term contract, but the recruitment of advisory staff was more of an issue: *'The recruitment of advisory staff in the prime of their career is a major problem.'* A shortage of applicants for advisory roles in recent years had led to difficulties recruiting the calibre of people required. A member of the advisory team responsible for the training of advisory staff in one Welsh authority stated: *'You can't get the quality and depth that you're looking for...'*

In those Welsh authorities where it has been necessary for advisory services to cater for both Welsh- and English-medium curricula, posts were advertised requiring bilingual applicants. This requirement was seen to reduce further the potential pool of applicants. In the context of teacher and headteacher recruitment, the need for bilingual advisers placed a further strain on those schools offering subjects in the Welsh medium. The need became a circular one, with these schools depending on the advisory services for assistance because of their own recruitment difficulties. One primary headteacher, concerned about the shortage of Welsh-speaking advisers, said:

They've had problems finding Welsh advisers. The previous headteacher of this school was seconded for 12 months to help with Welsh and he became a Welsh adviser, but when they advertised the post he was the only [applicant].

Advisers in large rural authorities felt in addition that the peripatetic nature of their work, and the significant amounts of travelling required to access schools, could also deter prospective applicants: *'In an area like this ...it can be a four-hour journey in the car, so that's not practical.'* In such areas, the travelling time was seen to add to the endemic long hours culture of the work.

School improvement managers and advisers highlighted a number of additional aspects of the work which they felt would deter prospective applicants. In particular they compared their workload, their need to multi-task, the stress of the work and eroding pay levels and status with colleagues who had remained in schools as headteachers. One recent recruit from class teaching spoke of the low status accorded to LEA advisers and inspectors amongst teachers:

[My move] ... definitely wasn't for anything like status... teachers actually see advisory work as a cop-out; they believe that if you were any good at teaching you'd be teaching.

As stated earlier, experience of managing a school was seen to be of key importance to headteachers of both primary and secondary schools. School improvement teams able to recruit senior managers from schools felt that this enhanced their credibility. Primary link or attached advisers were more readily recruited from a background of primary headship. Case study participants believed that this was possible because of the greater parity between the salaries of primary headteachers and LEA inspectors and advisers. However, a number of case study authority participants emphasised that headteachers from larger primary schools were already financially out of their reach. In addition, all participants stated they had difficulty in recruiting secondary headteachers and deputies to school improvement services. This was seen primarily to result from a lack of parity in pay, or because school improvement work was unable to offer the pay differentials which were assumed to accompany a promotion:

Increasingly, the salary structure in LEAs is unattractive compared with that in the school sector. There have been significant moves

recently to improve what advisers can receive and there has been some attempt to address that in the last Soulbury settlement...that is a help but it's not going to be sufficient to do the job, and it's further complicated by county councils' own salary structures ... which don't compare well now.'

Issues about working conditions were also raised. In particular, participants reflected, often ruefully, on the apparent lack of suitable office accommodation and insufficient administrative support.

The sense that, financially, school improvement work was not a viable career move was compounded by a general concern that LEAs were no longer secure employers. As one primary headteacher in a shire authority stated:

LEAs are fighting for their lives. They have been given a stay of execution, but could all be wiped out, with a new [private] company moving in.

This concern was echoed by a secondary headteacher in another county authority:

There's a financial issue and it's a less attractive job for heads of department, headteachers and deputies. It's not a natural progression, to take a pay cut, and with the ever-present threat from central government. LEAs have many responsibilities but little power. The power now lies at school level.

Despite recent assurances within the DfEE policy paper, *The Role of the Local Education Authority in School Education* (DfEE, 2000), this headteacher felt that what he perceived as the gradual erosion of local education authorities' power and status over the past two decades had created a climate of insecurity amongst headteachers, dissuading them from applying to join their school improvement teams.

2.2.2 Strategies to address recruitment difficulties

LEA survey responses

Thirty-three respondents to the LEA survey questionnaire described how their authority was addressing, or aiming to address, the recruitment problems they experienced. Many mentioned more than one approach. The main strategy mentioned, by about half of all respondents, was the provision of financial incentives such as salary matching, salary reviews or improved conditions of service.

Other strategies, mentioned by fewer respondents, were: greater use of part-time or seconded staff or consultants; promoting the LEA as an attractive place to work; recruiting with vigour and designing more attractive job advertisements and further details.

Case study responses

School improvement managers interviewed in the case study authorities reported a similar range of strategies to fill the skills and experience gaps occurring in their teams, although financial incentives were emphasised less within the case studies than in the questionnaire responses. These are outlined below:

The active promotion of the LEA as an employer and the area as an attractive place to live, work and develop professionally

All case study LEA school improvement managers and most advisers perceived their service to be in competition with other LEAs for school improvement staff. Within this context, there was wide recognition of the need to advertise vacant posts in an upbeat way to attract potential candidates. One school improvement manager in the south east talked about a recent advertisement campaign:

It was a fairly dynamic-looking advert. It gave the impression of a big and successful and thrusting authority, a place in which you could develop your skills. Some people have said they wanted to work in a big authority because they thought there would be more opportunities here.

However, in some authorities repeated advertisements for staff were seen to be counterproductive as they could create a negative, unsuccessful image for the LEA.

Another strategy employed by LEAs was the promotion of the authority as a good employer which offered professional development opportunities. In the words of one school improvement manager:

I believe we are becoming an employer of choice because of our concentration on learning, our confidence in our heads. We are creating a learning team, modelling effective learning in the team itself... for example, in knowledge management and transfer.

Another LEA had begun to develop an LEA-wide work-life balance project, in an attempt to address some of the problems associated with the long working hours culture in education. The key aims of this strategy were to reinforce an awareness that the whole authority team was working together to raise standards in education, and to promote the LEA as an attractive employer, conscious of its employees as people who had lives outside work which were important to their health and well-being.

In the past it was felt that advisers in Wales tended to remain in post, attracted by the relatively low cost of living and a pleasant environment. However, school improvement managers in Wales were recognising the need to invest more in marketing their services and promoting Wales as an attractive place to work. Where they had previously believed money should be spent on providing services and not, for example, on glossy promotional brochures, a school improvement manager in a Welsh authority explained that it was

now timely to rethink that policy: *'We need to sell ourselves more and the good things that are going on here...there are lots of things going on here that we should celebrate.'*

The use of headteachers as associates

Headteachers were a source of 'associate' members to school improvement teams. This strategy allowed school improvement teams to benefit from the current experience of successful headteachers, on a part-time basis, without needing to wrangle with issues of pay comparability and pay differentials. Most frequently headteachers were deployed to provide advice, support, mentoring and coaching to fellow headteachers working in difficult circumstances. Reasons reported for receiving this form of support included: the management of schools determined to be causing concern; difficult staff competency issues; and situations in which heads themselves were underperforming. In one authority, the headteacher associates had entered into formal contracts for this work and were paid additionally for it. Related to this, a number of experienced secondary headteachers regretted how infrequently their LEA school improvement team asked for their help, as experienced school managers. However other headteachers and school improvement managers noted that local headteachers were not always welcomed, in the school improvement role, by fellow headteachers. They commented that the abilities of a successful head were not synonymous with those of a successful school improver.

In many cases, headteachers were not aware of the extent of recruitment difficulties experienced by their LEA in finding suitable school improvement staff. In one shire authority, this was the case even amongst the headteacher associates who were being employed to provide management support to fellow heads in challenging schools and to contribute towards the LEA's training programme. The LEA in this case was not seen to be operating a deficit model, but seeking the experience of successful serving headteachers as the best source of advice, support and challenge to meet current needs. In other instances, headteachers were preoccupied with the recruitment and retention difficulties experienced in their own schools and were consequently less concerned about the LEAs' school improvement teams.

The use of school-focused strategies

The majority of the case study local authorities were using school-focused initiatives to provide a source of school improvement expertise. The majority of these initiatives arose from or supplemented national initiatives. These strategies included the use of Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs) and leading teachers for literacy and numeracy to demonstrate good practice to other teachers, and LEA facilitation of Beacon, specialist and other schools with recognised good practice to work with partner schools. School-focused strategies were most commonly used to disseminate good practice, while the use of associate headteachers was used more commonly to provide management support, working on a one-to-one basis with other headteachers and members of their senior management teams.

Headteachers frequently mentioned a range of school-focused strategies to provide support for school improvement – some facilitated by the LEA, others arising from their own initiatives. For example, in one shire authority, a cluster of primary schools in the town, originally funded by the LEA, had now become self-supporting. Schools in the cluster organised activities linked across the membership schools. Examples of the activities undertaken were: maths for gifted pupils; sports events and a collaborative millennium event. In another case, a headteacher said: *'The LEA is positive about schools using each other's practice, but it's not a structured programme.'* In the majority of case study LEAs, there were either informal or formalised groupings of schools or headteachers which provided professional support, debate and an opportunity to share effective practice.

Several headteachers had been approached to assist with the LEA school improvement strategy through requests for teachers to be seconded to the LEA or to be trained as lead teachers for the national strategies. Headteachers and governing bodies usually met both types of request. However, a number of headteachers explained the negative impact of secondments. For example, in the context of national teacher recruitment and retention difficulties, secondments of their most able staff left the school without their teaching skills and unable to advertise permanent posts in order to attract good replacements. These considerations coloured headteachers' decisions about acceding to their LEAs' requests. In the words of one primary headteacher:

The LEA has asked for this school's teachers to be lead teachers, but I haven't necessarily supported their requests, because of the negative effect upon our own school.

Another headteacher, while wishing to help the LEA, was concerned about his ability to replace the school's best teachers: *'Consultants [for the national strategies] are taken from schools. There are then concerns for the schools to replace their best teachers. It's shifting the recruitment and retention problem [back to the schools].'*

At the same time, headteachers did not always welcome the overtures made by Beacon Schools and Advanced Skills Teachers as an alternative route to good practice. A range of reasons was given for this. Most frequently, the standards and appropriateness of ASTs and Beacon Schools were questioned. A number of respondents, both headteachers and school improvement staff, stated that the LEA could play a key role in brokering these services in order to provide recognition of quality, external to the individual school, and to bring greater credibility to the school-based providers.

The use of flexible employment strategies

School improvement managers, especially in areas of high-cost housing, in inner city areas and those more remote geographically, reported the need to adopt a variety of flexible arrangements. For example, in one LEA, it had been seen to be necessary to devise flexible employment contracts in order to secure the employment of staff who had other commitments:

We've actually rewritten whole contracts in order to tie in some flexibility. We had difficulty finding a SEN inspector, so we had to appoint someone under special circumstances, which means agreeing special working hours and patterns.

Another post was 'tailored' to match the experiences of the applicant:

Having found someone who we thought brought a combination of skill, experience, ambition, interest and downright charisma, we then tailored the post to meet her particular experiences. When we advertised, we said we would be prepared to do that.

However, such strategies were not without their problems. One respondent, for example, clearly stated that she dared not discuss her salary with her colleagues as she was aware they were paid a lot less.

When advertisements were placed, there was the simultaneous use of professional networks to stimulate interest in the post: *'So we went out to advertisement and we also asked around like mad. "Who do you know who's ready for promotion? Who do you know who'd be interested in this?"'* This was taken further in some authorities where managers spoke of the active headhunting strategies that they adopted as a key recruitment tool, representing a more proactive, positive approach to finding the right people to undertake the work. In one authority, there was a strongly held view that frequent advertisements, particularly for unfilled posts, created the wrong image for the employer as unattractive and unsuccessful. Headhunting, within this context, was seen to be an assertive strategy which created a more attractive and positive image for the employer.

Welsh authorities also reported the need to adopt similarly flexible approaches when drawing up employment contracts for new recruits. As one school improvement manager explained:

For the last three appointments.... we've had to make them as secondments where we've had to offer the possibility..... [to be] paid on their headteacher salary rather than on Soulbury. We appointed an Early Years Adviser recently. We had to re-advertise the post. The second time around we had to advertise the post as either a permanent post or a two-year secondment with either the person receiving their headteacher salary or Soulbury and that was how we were able to recruit.

The London Partnership, established by a number of LEAs in order to provide a range of support for authorities within the London area, also had its eye upon flexible solutions to recruitment and retention difficulties:

Part of the rationale for being involved in the partnership was we also saw it as a recruitment and retention strategy as the partnership develops. In the long term ... we can collaborate to recruit them and share them [advisers] because we're working to common goals, common expectations, common standards across those authorities.

School improvement managers generally felt that current salary structures were too narrow and inflexible to be capable of providing the appropriate incentives. However, evidence that this was not always the case was provided by one of the advisers we interviewed, who stated:

... I actually said I wouldn't come unless I came for the same money that I was already earning... I am paid above and beyond the pay scale because I said I wouldn't come unless I was paid what I was as a head. Which I think is fair.....

One school improvement manager explained how he used the flexibility which the Soulbury pay scales and the Structured Professional Assessments (SPAs) allowed, in order to pay staff more, and therefore ease retention problems. Another authority had previously created pay flexibility by jointly funding a research adviser's post with a local higher education institution. This approach was seen to benefit the LEA in two ways: only half a salary had to be found by each of the partner employers and the school improvement team would benefit from the latest evidence-based information.

The use of freelance consultants and private providers

Freelance consultants were used particularly to fill specific gaps in subject expertise. This was a routine practice, to a greater or lesser extent, across all the case study LEAs. Consultants were both contracted directly to work within school improvement teams and recommended to schools for the purposes of 'buyback'. In all cases, LEA teams acted formally or informally as brokers of quality, choosing consultants they knew well or those who had been recommended by colleagues or schools.

There have recently been some high-profile developments in England of LEAs seeking partnership with providers of school improvement services from the private sector. Against this background, interviewees reported a range of partnerships and activities undertaken using private providers. Headteachers also reported the use of external providers for school improvement support. These included the use of national speakers for conference presentations and, occasionally, school development days, and the use of other LEA personnel, individual consultants or private companies to provide subject or phase INSET. The extent of their use depended upon the schools' particular needs, the perception of LEA personnel and their availability and the ethos of individual authorities in encouraging the use of private providers. In the words of one secondary headteacher:

I will buy expertise from wherever it comes: LEA advisers or elsewhere, sometimes from far away. I try to keep links with higher education institutes across the country where they have renowned specialisms, like Birmingham for autism.

Some schools used outside sources for specific quality assurance initiatives (for example, the Basic Skills Agency Quality Mark and Investors In People). In one large shire authority, however, the feeling that there was a lack of available funding in school budgets for development purposes was seen to be the reason for not choosing outside providers.

Private provision was mainly used for developmental purposes. No headteachers involved in the case studies gave examples of its use for the core school improvement functions of challenge and target setting to raise standards of achievement. However, headteachers in an authority which had moved into a partnership with a private provider were aware that this could change in the future. School improvement staff working for this authority spoke of the benefits that they felt would come from this partnership. These included: the wider perspective which comes from experience of working with schools nationally; flexible pay structures in order to attract high-quality candidates and the benefit of being able to work beyond county boundaries. Within this context, it was believed that private providers would fill the full spectrum of school improvement work in the future.

One school improvement manager, however, took a contrary view, seeing the use of freelance consultants and private providers as necessarily a short-term strategy. She believed that due to the context of rapid change in which they were working, it was not seen to be helpful to think in terms of static models of school improvement:

The notion of private providers is problematic. [Their personnel]... have been trained by the LEAs originally. It is a short-lived strategy for a national view. Private contractors cannot train personnel. They are a business. They take people fully fledged. This is critical, especially in failing LEAs and advisory and inspection services. There's not enough private capacity to backfill.

Within the context of the new national standards (DfES, 2001) for 'kitemarking' school improvement teams, however, all teams, local authority and private, would need to gain the accreditation in order to develop into the future. At the time of this study, the precise form and nature of these national standards was not yet known.

2.2.3 Summary and discussion

From the discussion above, it is evident that the recruitment of school improvement staff was clearly a concern for the case study and survey respondent LEAs. In order to support this claim, participants provided evidence that LEAs were encountering difficulties at all stages of the recruitment process. Not only were requests for application packs thin on the ground, but the applications that were completed were often reported to reflect a lack of suitable experience, skills or potential.

Suggested reasons for these difficulties were provided by school improvement managers, members of their teams and school heads. Most commonly, the related issues of salary differentials, parity of pay and pay structures were raised. This supports the work of Bird (2000) and Derrington (2000), who both highlight the erosion of salary differentials between headteachers and school improvement staff. Headteachers, in particular,

stated that they would not consider school improvement work unless it represented a financially viable career move, while advisers and inspectors highlighted their worry that their salaries were fast falling behind the salaries of many of their headteacher peers. In addition, headteachers and school improvement staff stated that the conditions of service, including travelling, a lack of contact with children, and a lack of facilities and administrative support, could also prove deterrents. A lack of certainty about the future of inspection and advisory work (see also Derrington, 2000) and LEAs *per se* was also mentioned by respondents.

In addition to the national conditions and circumstances of school improvement work, outlined above, a number of more localised circumstances were listed as disincentives for joining particular school improvement teams. In particular, southern English authorities tended to highlight the house prices and cost of living associated with their areas, an issue that has been highlighted as relevant to recruitment problems in a variety of public sector professions in recent years (Skills Insight, 2002; Society of Radiographers, 2000). In contrast, evidence from some of the more remote large rural counties showed that while the cost of living did not prove a barrier to recruitment, the time needed to travel between schools might do so.

A number of authorities had begun to address their recruitment problems, not least because of the empty desks in their offices, and the increased workload this created for those still in post. The following list highlights the solutions under discussion and under trial:

- ◆ the use of salary and contract flexibility to attract the right person to the job;
- ◆ the development of an ethos at work to see work and life outside work in balance, in order to address the long hours culture which existed in school improvement work (with staff often working in excess of 60 hours a week);
- ◆ the exploitation of 'pull factors' by promoting an authority as a good place to live and work;
- ◆ the use of school-based staff (both headteacher associates for management support and lead teachers for classroom support);
- ◆ the use of private providers and freelance consultants (usually promoted with a quality assurance guarantee);
- ◆ the use of networking and/or headhunting as recruitment tools.

Notwithstanding the value of a number of these recruitment tools, a number of negative impacts were also identified. In particular:

- ◆ Salary and contract inflexibility was highlighted in one authority as creating a climate of distrust and competition.
- ◆ Addressing the work/life balance and reducing the long hours culture was highlighted as problematic because work commitments could not be fulfilled within a 37.5 hour working week.

- ◆ In line with Derrington (2000), our study found that secondments of school-based staff to support the LEA's school improvement work were not always seen as an easy option. A number of headteachers highlighted a difficulty in finding a balance between the needs of the local authority and those of their schools. Seconding staff could be seen as detrimental to the children's education in a particular school.
- ◆ The use of private providers was also highlighted as problematic. There was an ambivalence for most respondents regarding how far such providers should be seen as competitors or resources to draw upon in times of need.
- ◆ Finally, headhunting had begun in at least one of the case study authorities, where it was seen as a positive approach and a means of avoiding a negative image of the authority conveyed by repeated advertisements. Other managers reported feeling the victim of such practices: here headhunting was perceived as either an unethical practice or as one which simply shifted the problem elsewhere: another example of *systemic recruitment turbulence*.

A number of the issues highlighted above as detrimental to the process of recruiting school improvement staff have the potential also to impact upon existing school improvement staff: for example, the lack of pay parity, conditions of service, long hours culture, uncertainty about the future of LEAs. This provides one explanation as to why recruitment and retention difficulties are often mentioned as interchangeable and interlinked. However, this study distinguishes the two processes, the problems encountered by LEAs when recruiting and retaining staff, and the solutions sought to these problems. The next section of the report will address these differences, first focusing on any difficulties associated with the retention of school improvement staff, and some of the existing and potential solutions that LEAs are adopting, or planning to adopt, to overcome these problems.

2.3 The retention of school improvement staff

2.3.1 Evidence of retention difficulties

LEA survey responses

In the LEA questionnaire survey, school improvement managers were asked to indicate whether their authority had experienced any difficulties in retaining school improvement staff since September 1998 and, if so, what had been their main reasons for leaving. They were also asked to describe briefly the ways in which the authority had addressed, or planned to address, retention difficulties. Half (21) of the school improvement managers who responded said that their authority had experienced difficulties in retaining school improvement staff during the past three years. The main reasons for staff leaving were: promotion (internal or external); to take up a post in a school; and to take up a post in another local authority. Smaller proportions had left to retire or to take up work in another capacity.

Case study responses

The clear statement that retention was causing difficulties in the LEA survey was not supported by case study evidence. Overall, there was a divergence of opinion across the case study authorities as to whether they were facing retention difficulties. This section of the report therefore sets out to do three things. First, it provides a discussion of the evidence provided by case study authorities of their retention difficulties, and potential explanations for these. Secondly, it moves on to discuss evidence which argues that, on the contrary, the retention of staff was not a key problem for school improvement teams, and provides potential explanations for this. In the light of this evidence, Section 2.3.2 draws on examples of best practice in the motivation of school improvement teams, to discuss existing and potential strategies for promoting staff retention.

Identifying retention difficulties

Evidence from the case study authorities revealed that a number of factors were significant in contributing to a high turnover of staff and thereby creating what we have termed in this report *systemic recruitment turbulence*.

In the light of the recruitment difficulties outlined so far, the ability of LEA school improvement teams to recruit colleagues directly from schools (either directly from headship and senior management positions or from the classroom to implement the national strategies for literacy, numeracy and key stage 3) was generally reported as a positive achievement. While a number of staff who had made this transition recently appeared to have done so successfully and quickly, others were not so settled. This was put down to a number of factors. Occasionally school improvement managers, team members and headteachers spoke of the difficulties experienced by headteachers recruited into the culture of school improvement roles. One school improvement manager described a 'learned helplessness' in transition from a position of authority to this different working culture. An adviser recalled her initial perceptions upon transferring from deputy headship to a school improvement role:

What I thought I could do, erroneously, was to spend all my time focusing on one thing and doing it really well. I thought I'd be able to do what I felt passionately about and this was going to provide that opportunity, but of course it didn't.

Some new recruits to school improvement were unhappy with their new role and responsibilities, to the extent that they were willing to leave the job. In two of the case study LEAs, school improvement managers reported the rapid return to school of individual recruits from both headship and classroom teaching because they found themselves unsuited to the wide-ranging roles and skills required by school improvement work.

However, more frequently, the conditions under which 'school-based' recruits joined school improvement teams meant that their contributions would necessarily be short-term. The reasons for this, uncovered by the case study interviews, tie in closely with wider changes in Western work

practices (outlined in more detail in Appendix 2 of this report). In particular it is useful to turn to Felsted and Jewson's (1999) discussion of the ways that employment is becoming more precarious as jobs are more readily terminated through redundancy, downsizing and short-term contracts. For example, the consultants employed to implement the national strategies were, and continue to be, appointed on short-term contracts.

In addition Felsted and Jewson (1999) highlight how work is becoming more *contingent*, with many workers attaching a number of personal aims and objectives to their employment, believing that jobs will come to a natural end when these are reached. In line with this trend, many of the ex-headteachers in our sample, who had recently joined school improvement teams, tended to speak of the attraction of the role change within the context of their own continuing professional development. They typically defined the work as a professional development interlude, using it as a stepping-stone back into teaching at a more senior level or towards the headship of a larger school. A recently appointed school improvement team member spoke about the conscious decision that she made to enter advisory work for a short period before returning to teaching: *'I just see the Inspectorate as learning time and perhaps a lever to get me back into school in a senior management position.'*

The recognition that jobs for life was an outdated concept was also echoed by some of the school improvement managers. They not only perceived the concept of retention to be outdated, but clearly stated that while a high turnover of staff was in evidence, this was not necessarily a reflection of their failure as employers. Interviewees, from three authorities, suggested that the retention of staff should not necessarily be highlighted as a discrete school improvement service problem for which distinctive solutions should be sought. They reflected on the wider changes under way in working practices and the fact that many people appear now to 'skill-build' rather than 'career-build' as they move from job to job.

This argument is further supported by evidence that job satisfaction was high amongst members of school improvement teams: even those who discussed the possibility of leaving after a couple of years. Both school improvement managers and advisers referred to ways in which the role provided high job satisfaction. Most frequently they mentioned factors such as teamwork, the challenge of a fast-paced, problem-solving role, the variety of professional experience provided by school improvement work and the professional satisfaction to be gained from 'making a difference'. In the best examples of teamwork, there was a management-led team culture of openness, a willingness to ask for help, and respect and concern for the members of the team. A recently recruited member of a school improvement team commented that:

[From the moment I arrived] ...there was a feeling that we were valuable, the work that we were going to do was valued... In my whole career I have never been so supported by the people I work with.

The perceptions outlined above reflected many of the elements Wenger analysed as criteria for successful work-based 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998): teamwork, mutual support, commiseration about the pressures of the role and the development of shared histories through a range of team meetings, focused support and working groups. In most cases, participants stated that these were enough to overcome any dissatisfaction they felt about pay, conditions, workload, the multiple demands of the role and an apparent lack of career prospects in the school improvement field (all highlighted earlier as factors which could deter prospective applicants to the job).

To explore this further, the case study interviewees spent some time discussing the satisfactions and frustrations of school improvement work and individuals' motivations and reasons for staying within the school improvement field. There was a high degree of agreement between managers and their team members about the attraction of the variety, the challenges, the problem-solving and the interpersonal aspects of their work. They also spoke of the 'privilege' of working in a large number of schools across the LEA and the opportunities to help others to improve. For example, one principal inspector spoke of:

...the privilege of working in different schools because you are then able to access and see a whole range of management styles and the way in which schools tackle different problems.

Inspectors and advisers felt that they did not do their job for the status (or indeed the lack of status) that it conferred upon them. When asked about this, the most common response was that they did not see themselves as status conscious. Instead they felt driven by professional values and principles and the wish to help others develop, and stated that they gained satisfaction from this. School improvement work was not seen as the domain of the status conscious.

While there was undoubtedly a regular turnover of staff in the case study school improvement services, there was little agreement as to whether retention should be seen as a discrete problem, or whether the status of this turnover was simply intensified by the recruitment problems of *systemic recruitment turbulence* highlighted earlier. What follows, then, is a discussion of the ways that our case study school improvement services have addressed some of the more negative aspects of their work, and their working environment, in order to improve job satisfaction and to provide opportunities for skills development – both of which may prove crucial in the maintenance of a stable and satisfied workforce.

2.3.2 Strategies to address retention difficulties

LEA survey responses

Less than a third (13) of all respondents gave details of the ways in which authorities were addressing, or aiming to address, retention problems. There were no clear patterns in their responses. The most frequently cited strategy

(mentioned by seven respondents) was the provision of financial incentives. Less frequently mentioned were: promotion opportunities and restructuring the service. One respondent, whose LEA had adopted all three approaches, summed it up as:

Increased salary scales and refined structure to facilitate more promotion opportunities within [the] service.

Case study responses

The evidence presented so far reveals that the majority of factors which affected retention were factors which contributed to a change in advisers' roles. Some inspectors and advisers, because of high job satisfaction, stated that they were unlikely to leave their work unless it could no longer provide them with the skills, experience and pay they were seeking. In such circumstances, they would wish to move on in order to seek these new skills, experiences and salaries elsewhere. Other school improvement managers and long-standing advisers stated that they had remained too long in their role: so there were perceived to be few realistic options for them to move on to new ones.

Career promotion

To overcome such uncertainty within the job, a number of authorities felt that school improvement services could helpfully emphasise the clarity about the future of LEAs and the clearer role, career structure and career opportunities that were emerging for advisers and inspectors to both potential and existing staff.

Promoting job satisfaction

Others believed in the importance of creating a professional service, informed by professional standards, in which colleagues could wish to remain because of high levels of job satisfaction. In order to do this, some LEAs emphasised the importance of continuing professional development in the retention and development of teams so that members would continue to have the appropriate skills and knowledge to remain effective in their roles. The concept of personal motivation as an important element of job satisfaction lay implicitly in many of our interviewees' responses. Their sentiments echoed those contained within the *Draft Circular on Best Value and Performance Improvement. A Consultation Paper*, (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2002, para 54): '*Best value cannot be delivered without a well-trained and motivated workforce.*'

Balancing work and life

The LEA which has begun to develop a work-life balance project was particularly aware, being in a high-cost housing area, of the need to encourage loyalty to the LEA and a sense of the larger team across the authority. This LEA, amongst a number of others, had begun to debate the long hours culture which is endemic in many areas of education. A number of managers who were interviewed clearly stated that they encouraged their staff to reassess their diary commitments in order to create time for

themselves as well as professional thinking time. As one principal inspector stated:

People by and large don't get left on their own. We certainly monitor their activities and their workload and the balance of activities as well.

Providing support during role transitions

A number of school improvement managers recognised a need to support new school improvement staff and to help them, as they became settled in the role, to step out of the single-school or single-phase way of thinking, to embrace more of a whole-school or whole-authority approach and to engage in activities which had hitherto been outside their domain. It was hoped that this would help to stem the flow of individuals back into teaching. It was additionally mentioned that such support should also be provided for those moving within the service from operational to strategic positions. A senior inspector who had recently taken on a management role within a school improvement service told us:

I don't think anyone has done anything by way of induction to the job I'm doing now. I think the assumption was that... I could just do the job.

2.2.3 Summary and discussion

As stated earlier, it is unclear how far 'retention' problems in school improvement services are distinctly the result of:

- a) wider changes in western working practices (including the increasing use of short-term contracts or the wish of some recruits to remain in post for relatively short periods in order to develop professionally before moving on)
- b) a number of key changes in the role, salary differentials and remit of school improvement teams (outlined in Section 2.1 of this report).
- c) circumstances specific to certain local authority areas (for example the cost of living and long travelling distances).

Nevertheless, a combination of these factors has resulted in some turnover of school improvement staff, exacerbated further by difficulties in recruitment *per se*. In responding to these various changes, the school improvement managers who responded to this issue tended to focus on the factors over which they had some control: in particular some of the perceived inadequacies of their working conditions and their remit. A number of school improvement teams (and sometimes their wider authorities) were therefore working on strategies aimed both at attracting new recruits and maintaining and raising the job satisfaction of existing staff members. These included:

- ◆ the promotion of LEAs as a good employer
- ◆ the promotion of job satisfaction, teamwork and individual motivation
- ◆ the promotion of skills-building opportunities

- ◆ the promotion of a work–life balance
- ◆ the provision of supported role transitions.

In some cases, however, the satisfaction already afforded by school improvement work meant that certain members of school improvement teams were very long standing. Problems ensued in the fast changing world of school improvement work when these individuals failed to update their experience and skills. Moreover, with few possibilities of promotion within the team, it was believed that a number of advisers had few options to move on: since they had stayed in their posts too long and would not now be credible candidates for more highly paid management jobs in schools, or elsewhere. This group was in contrast to the highly mobile newer recruits, discussed above, who were clearly aware that they would move on into a new role once they had gained the experiences and skills that they believed their job could offer.

This highlights the two ways in which continuing professional development (CPD) activities can help school improvement services: first, in maintaining suitably skilled and professionally credible school improvement staff and, secondly, in providing members of staff with an ever increasing skills base. School improvement team credibility emerges within this context as both a recruitment issue and a team management issue. The next section of the report therefore considers this further, looking at the ways in which school improvement services use CPD to develop their staff, both as individuals and as members of a team.

2.4 The training and development of school improvement staff

The LEA survey responses

About two-thirds (28) of respondents to the LEA survey questionnaire believed that there was a significant need to retrain existing advisory and inspection team members in order to carry out school improvement work. The main reasons, each given by about half of all respondents, were: to update the team's skills in line with EDP requirements; to maintain credibility with schools; to develop existing workforce skills and to meet LEA school improvement responsibilities. Slightly fewer (18) school improvement managers indicated that there was a need to address the 'cross-cutting' approach of the local government modernising agenda.

About three-quarters (30) of the respondents provided information on training opportunities for existing staff. Most frequently mentioned were OFSTED training and conference attendance for purposes of team training.

Most (37 out of 42) of the school improvement managers indicated that their authorities operated a performance management system. Normally this included: reviews of performance; individual target setting; and links

to personal development plans. Links to pay were less frequent. In most cases (33), the performance management system was part of an authority-wide approach.

About three-quarters (29) of the respondents indicated that their authorities had considered the skills and competencies of the school improvement service through team discussions or workshops designed to provide information and raise awareness. Other important contexts, although mentioned by fewer respondents, were: within the framework of nationally available structures such as Investors in People or the Virtual Staff College Competence Framework; through competencies or criteria generated by national bodies, such as professional associations; and by development and use of locally generated competencies or criteria.

Case study responses

The concept of training proved problematic within the case studies. All participants tended to think of training as specific to skills development, whereas the more wide-reaching concepts of professional development or continuing professional development and lifelong learning sat more easily within the educational cultures outlined by the respondents. Professional development, then, across the case study authorities overall, emerged as having five interdependent elements: induction; skills development; awareness raising and updating professional knowledge; the identification of individual development needs arising from appraisal or performance management systems; and the job or role itself as professional development. Sometimes these elements were framed within the corporate context of the local authority.

Induction

Most of the LEAs have developed, or were developing, induction systems for new recruits to their teams. These systems all tended to include elements of personal support, awareness raising, information giving and review. There was a range of practice which was implemented both formally and informally. Typically, induction included: general introductions to the LEA; provision of a mentor with whom review meetings would be undertaken; a short period of work shadowing and visits to schools. For consultants appointed to implement the national strategies in literacy, numeracy and key stage 3, induction also included attendance at the national training programme. In one LEA, work had begun to develop the existing induction programme more specifically in line with the mooted professional standards for school improvement work. Induction systems were the most confidently developed aspect of school improvement team training and development overall.

However, it was acknowledged by the majority of participants that a significant element of induction was 'on the job' experience. The most positive aspect of this kind of induction was seen to be its capacity to deal with the individual adviser's development needs. For example, headteachers coming into school improvement work directly from schools reported

different induction needs from advisers moving from other LEAs. Conversely, participants reported some negative aspects of 'on the job' induction. These included: a potential lack of a systematic approach to induction and a high risk of making mistakes in circumstances where it was felt there was only one chance 'to get it right' when working with schools on sensitive issues.

In general, induction of permanent staff was felt to be more successful than that for staff on short-term or secondment contracts. When teams were short-staffed, induction of new colleagues frequently did not occur, despite agreed policies. Case study participants reported a lack of induction for individuals who moved into higher levels of management. This was deemed important if staff were moving to undertake strategic rather than operational roles.

Skills development

Skills development was generally reported to be of two types: the generic interpersonal skills needed for the roles of challenge, support and consultancy; and the specific skills required to carry out the school improvement role. Training in these skills almost without exception was reported as being available from three main sources: OFSTED, in-house and from professional associations. For example, school improvement managers and advisers felt overwhelmingly that OFSTED inspection training was crucial on a number of counts. First, it provided training in the specific skills of school improvement. Secondly it developed individuals' abilities to evaluate standards of achievement within a national context. Thirdly it helped to hone skills of analysing and evaluating evidence from a range of documentary sources and from classroom observation. And finally, it trained advisers to communicate judgements clearly and positively. One newly appointed adviser, who had recently moved from a headteacher's post in the authority, put the value placed on this training succinctly:

... it's the most useful professional training I have ever had. I would have paid myself to have it if it had been available [when I was a head].

However, while extending the skills base of new and existing school improvement staff, undertaking OFSTED training was not always viewed as a positive activity. One new adviser in a county authority, recruited from a school, was aware of her former colleagues' ambivalence towards the OFSTED system of inspection and, therefore, the skills and training required to carry it out. She stated: *'I have to say I haven't spread it too broadly that I'm doing some OFSTED training. I need some friends!'*

Skills training in the understanding, interpretation and use of performance data was typically reported to come from both in-house and OFSTED sources. The professional associations were used predominantly for subject-specific advice and support in the deployment of school improvement strategies. The National Association for Educational Advisers, Inspectors and Consultants (NAEIAC) was also used for generic training in the interpersonal skills needed for the roles of challenge, support and consultancy.

Many of the advisory staff in Welsh authorities have received Estyn training. Those interviewed did not carry out inspections within their own authorities, but were allowed or encouraged to inspect in other authorities, in order to keep their skills and knowledge updated. The manager of one advisory service explained the policy in this authority:

People would say that the Estyn training is the most rigorous training that they've ever undertaken. Our philosophy is that people should be allowed to do at least one inspection a year so that they keep up to date with what's going on.

The same manager commented that Welsh teams were facing competition from English teams for Estyn inspections, as English teams had been winning contracts in Wales due to their ability to bid competitively. To remedy the situation, and to ensure that Welsh inspectors had the opportunity to carry out inspections and maintain their registration as an inspector, this particular authority had started working with private companies.

Some respondents in England also mentioned that OFSTED training helped advisers to acquire the skills necessary to facilitate *school self-evaluation*. This was seen as the next important development in supporting self-managing schools. In one LEA, prompted by a wish to see schools take ownership of the judgements made of their performance, development had begun of school level mediation for school improvement judgements. The criteria for judgements in this approach were to be shared with schools, who would then be asked to carry out an individual school self-evaluation review. The school improvement team intended through this approach to undertake an independent review of the school, followed by a mediation of the two sets of judgements to provide appropriate targets for the school's development programme.

Another LEA had begun to develop a continuing professional development programme for the education service more widely. This focused upon the education development plan priorities and the skills and knowledge advisers and officers would need to deliver and monitor the EDP.

Awareness raising, updating professional knowledge and continuing professional development

In addition to the updating of knowledge and awareness which arose from taking part in OFSTED and Estyn inspection teams, all of the case study school improvement teams, as a matter of routine, arranged regular meetings designed to maintain individuals' awareness and understanding of current initiatives in education. These meetings were largely organised for subject or phase groups. However, regular whole-team business or updating meetings were also common. Whole-team conferences, arranged to explore important policies or new Government initiatives, were also used but on a less frequent basis. The latter often included presentations by speakers from outside the LEA.

Two LEAs reported offering the opportunity for school improvement team members to pursue accredited courses and study towards higher degrees.

The identification of individual development needs arising from appraisal or performance management systems

All of the case study LEAs had performance management or review systems in place, but they were not all seen to be prominent features of their school improvement teams' development, or specific elements of their strategies to recruit and retain appropriate staff. These systems ranged from being largely informal to those which were formally integrated into their authorities' corporate review and development systems. There was a widespread, often tacit, understanding that the value of performance management systems lay in the opportunities to identify individual development needs. Advisers, in particular, valued systems which were perceived to be close to their individual needs and to the reality of their work. Within this context, whole-authority systems were admired for their comprehensiveness, but not necessarily seen as important in meeting individual needs. One authority's introductory statement of the Professional Review and Development Policy typified the relationship understood between the success of the organisation as a whole and the development of individuals within it:

Organisations are successful when the people within them do their jobs effectively. For this to happen, staff need to be both well trained and given opportunities to develop their professional skills. The Quality Division is, therefore, committed to providing opportunities for all members of the team to engage in professional review and development.

There was one instance where local authority-wide structures were seen by the school improvement team members to impede a service-wide approach to training. In this particular case, the systems for accessing funding for training needs from corporate sources were perceived as convoluted.

Performance management in the case study authorities tended to operate annually, although considerable slippage was reported despite good intentions. The reasons for such slippage included: staff shortages, staff movement and the pressures of the work. The majority of school improvement managers and advisers set targets as a result of performance management interviews. These targets were in general 'soft' targets which indicated areas or amounts of work to be covered. Rarely were there attempts to link individual advisers' targets with the performance targets of the schools for which they were responsible. In common with the findings of the recent study of performance management in local education authorities in Wales (Colbourne *et al.*, 2002), linking individual targets with local authority corporate targets was seen to be problematic. In a minority of case study authorities, performance management processes had begun to include professional development portfolios. These collected examples of skills,

experience and knowledge gained from both CPD activities and from undertaking the work itself. Where used, there was a high level of enthusiasm for an evidence-based approach which had equity of control shared amongst the participants in the performance management system.

The relatively low profile given to formal performance management systems and their links to professional development was a surprising finding of this study. Within the context of the system of local authority Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), following publication by the Audit Commission of its consultation document (2002), all school improvement teams will soon be required to focus upon performance management and its structured links with professional development and individual target setting. Interestingly, these links were not directly evident in this study. While this, in part, may be due to the fact that our interview questions did not explicitly ask for this link to be made, it will be useful for future research to explore whether the awareness, discussion or tangible evidence of such links increases with the introduction and development of CPA; and whether such links relate to improvements in recruitment and retention of staff.

The job or role itself as professional development

The case study headteachers and teachers who had been recruited into school improvement teams spoke assertively about their career moves as part of a longer-term career development. As outlined earlier in this report, recent recruits from headship and class teaching typically defined the work as a professional development interlude, using it as a stepping-stone back into teaching at more senior level or towards the headship of a larger school. However, it is unclear how far the short-term view was structured by the nature of their contracts. Some teachers were recruited on fixed-term contracts to implement one of the national strategies. Others used secondments of up to two years in order to gain a wider educational perspective than working in one school had allowed. In many ways, it can be argued that recent recruits to LEA school improvement work took portfolio working for granted – an attitude that was much less evident amongst more established advisory staff interviewed for this study.

What is perhaps most pertinent to this study is the fact that in most cases, school improvement managers and individual advisers did not link training and professional development specifically to the issues they were facing regarding recruitment and retention of colleagues to school improvement work. Neither was there an emphasis upon the professional development opportunities as a recruitment tool – a recruitment strategy already established in several LEAs as a teacher and headteacher recruitment tool (Morton, 2002).

Summary and Discussion

There was clearly a culture of training and development which the majority of school improvement teams took for granted – not surprisingly within a culture of implementing and delivering education and training. Generic training aimed at whole teams and person-specific development were undertaken simultaneously.

The management-organised training and development which emerged as being particularly focused upon recruitment and retention of school improvement staff emerged as having five interdependent elements: induction; skills development; awareness raising and updating professional knowledge; the identification of individual development needs arising from appraisal or performance management systems; and the job itself as presenting professional development opportunities. Induction systems for new recruits, mentoring, regular updating meetings, informal peer support were well established custom and practice within school improvement teams, as was undertaking the national inspection training provided by OFSTED and Estyn.

While the above approaches to training were valued by individual advisers, these were counterbalanced in the views of both new and longer-standing advisers by the value of challenges presented by the job itself. The opportunities for individual professional development arising from ‘thinking on your feet’, the range and variety of the work and problem-solving, which relate directly to the motivational aspects of school improvement work explored earlier in the report, were seen to be of paramount importance. School improvement managers recognised these issues in their own professional development, but there was relatively little explicit recognition of them as factors to be managed and exploited within the team’s strategy for professional development and its relationship to recruitment and training.

Appraisal and performance management systems were in place as a matter of routine. The relative back seat position of these as a feature of professional development reality for the majority of case study authorities may well be more a question of transition and corporate local authority management of change than lack of awareness of their potential. There was wide acknowledgement of the potential benefit to be derived from development of national standards for school improvement work: one authority had already begun to shape an induction programme to reflect these. There was also wide acknowledgement of the need for local authorities to move to consistent performance review, as heralded in the CPA arrangements. However, while waiting for the detail of the national standards, combined with the period of local authority corporate consideration of CPA, school improvement managers were generally holding their fire before putting into place revised performance management systems.

Some case study authorities had begun to promote the quality of their planned professional development opportunities as part of their recruitment and retention strategies, but the explicit relationships between these were not prominent overall.

2.5 An eye to the future

All case study respondents were adamant that the advisers and school improvers of the future must come from schools. In the words of one school improvement manager: *'Help has to be grown in schools. Schools won't accept it if it's not. They demand an understanding of context and background..... they need shared experience.'* School improvement managers and advisers saw the need for an increasingly flexible service, probably with smaller teams of more highly paid individuals. They were also clear about the need for career fluidity between school improvement roles and schools, in order to develop complementary skills. This, however, would need a less status conscious and less hierarchical relationship between schools and the LEA school improvement teams. In the words of one advisory teacher in a London borough: *'I think they should have secondments for all inspectors and advisers, in schools, to remind them of the practicalities.'*

The National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH), the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers (LPSH) and other potential future accreditation programmes for new heads and serving headteachers were also seen as crucial to advisers' development in the future. These were deemed necessary if advisers were to have a full complement of professional skills which would provide them with credibility as advisers to senior managers in schools. In emphasising the need for advisers to remain 'in touch' with school-level skills and experiences, one school improvement manager used a medical analogy. He stated that school advisers could learn from medical consultants, who work both as practitioners and as advisers/experts throughout their career. In short, he believed that the barriers between school-based and advisory workers need to be broken down to create a more fluid system. Following this model, school improvement teams would not only gain a practical understanding of the reality of school-level work from observation and discussion with headteachers and teachers, but would also update their skills by going back into the classroom. This is necessary to complement the increasing number of teachers and headteachers who are working for school improvement services on a sabbatical basis.

Another school improvement manager felt that the concept of school improvement itself would soon be outdated and unhelpful, preferring that of 'school transformation'. This transformation was seen to be arising from a continuing thrust towards the school as the locus of responsibility for improvement and raising standards, with an accompanying level of skills and understanding in schools to undertake rigorous self-evaluation. In turn, the role of the LEA will need to change: *'So what will be the role of LEAs or other regional organisation? It has to be [on the one hand] about knowledge management.'* On the other hand,

The only point of the [LEA] provision will be the human relationship, which currently goes largely unnoticed... the pastoral element. Private providers cannot provide the personal, the continual regeneration of schools through networks. Advisers and inspectors are the people with national and regional networks to bring back into schools.

In other LEAs, there was a commitment to a proactive stance towards the role which local authorities had to play in the future. The London Partnership has been developed with this in mind, as one London school improvement manager explained:

The philosophy that underpins [the Partnership] is that contrary to the widely accepted view that the private sector might know better, we took the view that [we in] the public sector could be helping ourselves and each other. The point of the London Partnership is that we can work with each other to improve our own services but also offer support for other LEAs...to help them to improve their services from within.

A school improvement manager in a county authority emphasised the need for LEAs to prove their relevance to schools in the future: *'I am keen to make learning the centre of what we do. We must make the LEA relevant to schools and communities, through strong partnerships, close links with governors and staff.'*

PART THREE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The policy context

This study was undertaken against a changing backdrop of national policy: to address the national shortage of headteachers and teachers, with the development of national standards for local authority school improvement work and the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) of local authorities. Notwithstanding uncertainties for the future, in the here and now, headteachers frequently commented upon the experience, helpfulness and appropriateness of the knowledge and approach which their advisers brought to support their school improvement efforts. Headteachers across both the primary and secondary phases commented upon the unique ability of LEA school improvement staff to bring to the work a long-term knowledge of the schools, their history and development.

The study reveals a balance between local and national definitions of the difficulties and solutions relating to the recruitment, retention and training of school improvement staff. Whilst there are similar strategies being tried across local authorities to improve the recruitment and retention of staff with appropriate experience, knowledge, skills and personal qualities, the interpretation of these strategies assumes local characteristics (Harris, 200b). Against the general national shortage of school improvement staff, some LEAs are particularly affected by the cost of housing in their area, by competition from other authorities or private providers, or, as in certain parts of Wales, by particular curriculum and language requirements. The interrelationships between national and local definitions and solutions reflect the responsibilities outlined in, for example, the School Standards and Framework Act, (GB. Statutes, 1998). They also reflect the wider national political modernisation agenda to 'join up' services so that they make sense and are accessible to members of the public at local level.

Our study confirms that the pay and conditions of school improvement teams are no longer comparable with those of colleagues working in schools: that this lack of comparability presents significant national recruitment and retention issues; and that it impedes the flexibility and fluidity of career building and experience transfer which many respondents were seeking to achieve.

Recruitment to a changing role

There was wide recognition that school improvement staff now need a wider range of professional skills and knowledge as a result of requirements brought about by the School Standards and Framework Act (GB. Statutes,

1998). There is also a need for individuals to use these skills and knowledge simultaneously and to be judged by the speed of their effectiveness. LEAs were reporting widely that recruitment of staff with suitable experience, skills, knowledge and qualities has become problematic. The perception of the extent of these recruitment problems is not necessarily shared by schools, nor necessarily perceived by headteachers to be a major problem. When headteachers outlined shortcomings in individual advisers or advisory team provision, these were not always perceived as recruitment issues.

There was agreement amongst school improvement managers and advisers about the recent changes in core skills needed to carry out school improvement work successfully: analysis of performance data, target setting, challenge and focused support were now seen to be of high importance. Common agreement about the range of experience, skills, knowledge and qualities necessary for school improvement work, however, did not emerge from the study, because the boundaries of the school improvement role were defined very differently across the case study LEAs. There was, however, agreement about the central importance of interpersonal skills and personal qualities to the role. There was confirmation across participants in the research study that the interpersonal skills and personal qualities of those undertaking school improvement work are essential to success and are distinct from the professional knowledge and experience which are brought to the role (NAIEAC, 2001)

LEAs typically used a combination of strategies to attract suitable school improvement staff, emphasising some or all of the following: positive promotion of their LEA and the area; flexible contracts of employment; the use of recent or serving headteachers, particularly to support other headteachers managing schools in challenging circumstances; the use of school-based expertise; and the use of freelance consultants and private providers. However, deploying the most able staff from schools to support LEA school improvement work was seen to create a sometimes unhelpful systemic turbulence within the context of national shortages of teachers and headteachers.

Staff retention

Retention difficulties of school improvement staff were acknowledged, but not seen to be as acute as those relating to recruitment. Recruitment difficulties were described both as issues of high turnover and those of lack of staff movement. Whilst the credibility which comes from recent and appropriate experience was seen to be of central importance to both recruitment and retention of local authority school improvement staff, in other respects recruitment and retention were seen to be distinct processes.

The aspects of the school improvement role which motivated colleagues to stay in the job were particularly those of feeling they were 'making a difference', teamwork, the 'privilege' of a role which gave a wider educational perspective, the variety and challenge of the job, and the need

for their interpersonal and problem-solving skills. For many, these factors were sufficient to counteract poorer pay, status and working conditions than could be enjoyed in schools, the long hours and stress of the job.

The concept of 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998) emerged as a key to success in both the retention of staff and in demonstrating credibility within schools: through teamwork and the sense of belonging and mutual support which served to bond individual advisers to their LEA teams; and through the processes of providing focused team support to schools facing difficulties.

The ambiguities surrounding the school improvement role identified by Ainscow *et al.* (2000) were acknowledged by participants in this study: as frequently perceived as a positive challenge to problem-solve and to 'think on one's feet' than as a source of stress. The study reveals no convincing evidence that the school improvement role is perceived currently as an unattractive career move (Derrington, 2000), because of its complexity or ambiguity: either by those who undertake the work or from headteachers who encourage their members of staff to become involved as leading teachers or national strategy consultants, for example. The changing role of school improvement has brought about changing relationships with schools. There was some evidence that headteachers of successful schools, feeling themselves at arms' length from the local authority priorities to raise standards, questioned the relevance of local authority school improvement teams.

Some participants, meanwhile, viewed current definitions of retention as outdated: expecting team members to use the role in order to develop new skills and abilities before moving on to other professional challenges. There was confirmation that the world of work is perceived increasingly by those working in school improvement roles to be more flexible (Beck, 1992; Felstead and Jewson, 1999) with expectations of portfolio working, and via professional development to be gained through undertaking new roles. An awareness of portfolio careers was particularly evident amongst recent recruits from schools into school improvement work. Long-standing advisers tended to cite the changing nature of advisory work and the frequent need to take on new responsibilities and learn new skills.

Training and development

Whilst all LEAs provided training opportunities, the term 'training' itself was felt to be of limited usefulness, with a preference for the more holistic concepts of continuous professional development and lifelong learning. Training and development were widely accepted as central to successful retention of school improvement staff. However, only a minority of local authorities taking part in this study were promoting the professional development they offered to their staff as an explicit recruitment strategy.

Professional development for school improvement staff commonly involved the interdependent elements of induction, skills development, awareness raising and updating professional knowledge, identification of individual development needs and involvement in the work itself. Participation in nationally provided training and gaining nationally acknowledged accreditation, particularly through OFSTED, were generally perceived to bring greater credibility to the school improvement role than training provided locally by individual LEAs. The concept of credibility as an essential part of fitness to practise emerged as crucial to undertaking the school improvement role successfully (Kouzes, and Posner, 1993). It was also intimately linked to recruitment and retention of local authority school improvement staff. As yet, the systems to put into practice a recast notion of the portfolio career in school improvement were less explicit or developed than a recognition of a changing school improvement role within local authorities.

Whilst participants were generally in favour of national standards for school improvement work, during the time of the study these had receded from national discussion and so there were uncertainties expressed as to the details of their form and introduction. There was strong recognition by both headteachers and school improvement teams that strong interpersonal skills were crucial to the role.

While there was wide recognition of the key importance played by teamwork, group support and group dynamics in local authority teams' ability to deliver the school improvement agenda, these were seen to mainly operate informally rather than as an explicit element of training and development. Their development was most in evidence through the knowledge-sharing which can result from on-the-job working groups or large, conference-type meetings, rather than at the level of skills development.

The future

The study revealed a strong feeling that the school improvers of the future should come from and needed to be recruited from schools. At the same time, there was some recognition that LEA school improvement work is not the same as that of the teacher or headteacher. The skills required may well be transferable, but they are not identical.

There was wide agreement that there should be career fluidity between school and advisory roles, with comparable professional development requirements, supported by comparable pay scales and conditions of service. There was some indication that, in order to exercise credible leadership roles, school improvement posts should attract higher salaries than senior management positions in schools. There was some discussion of the need to recast current notions of professional practice, so that school improvers

could be both practitioners and advisers in the way that medical consultants are. Such fluidity of career opportunity would require a holistic conceptualisation of national educational leadership training and development.

There was agreement that the work–life balance of school improvement teams should be taken more seriously, managed at the most senior levels within LEAs and within the wider context of the local authorities. The most frequently cited problem was of a long hours culture, which exhausted individuals and was suspected of discouraging potential recruits. These problems were seen to be endemic across schools and local authorities.

Distinctive features of school improvement work in Wales

Many of the issues arising from this research study applied to both English and Welsh authorities. The differences between the two Welsh case study authorities serving an urban population and a dispersed rural population were equally great as differences between some English urban and rural populations. However, there were distinctive features of the education culture in Wales arising from approaches to school inspection through Estyn and to publication of school performance ‘league tables’. In general, the Welsh participants expected a more pronounced pastoral relationship between schools and advisory services than one of challenge. Overall, recruitment difficulties were not found to be as pronounced in Wales as in England.

Recommendations

The work of school improvement has become complex, strategically and practically. Although this study focused upon the recruitment, retention and training of local authority school improvement staff, the suggestions for improvements do not lie within the LEAs alone. Recommendations arising from this study therefore require a synergy between national, local and individual career development and strategy.

In line with the ‘joined up thinking’ of the modernisation agenda, at a national policy level, the recruitment and retention of school improvement staff would benefit from integration with policies aimed at both the recruitment of teachers and headteachers and with those to raise standards of achievement of pupils, students and adults. National training and development programmes which recognise both the common and the distinctive aspects of school improvement work within schools and within local authorities could be embedded in national policy and leadership development, so that career fluidity becomes both practically possible and mutually beneficial.

In order to reinforce such career fluidity, alternative models of professional practice which confer credibility are recommended. These already exist from other professions in the UK, for example, in the medical profession, where undertaking aspects a programme of nationally organised specialist training, is an annual requirement in order that individuals may demonstrate their ongoing fitness to practise. Such practice could provide completion of the development process begun by articulating a set of national standards for school improvement work. In addition, experience already exists of wider, across-group training, in, for example, the Employer Learning Networks (Rhodes and Graver, 2002), which could stimulate development within school improvement arenas.

At local authority level, it would be beneficial if promotion of professional development opportunities were to be used more explicitly to show potential school improvement candidates how LEA school improvement work could contribute to their professional portfolio of skills and experience. This would require explicit recognition that, while planning for strategic continuity, individual jobs are no longer for life: the performance management systems would then include plans for career development, career change and for transition and positive exit strategies to complement existing induction programmes.

At the same time, while the portfolio approach to professional development operates at an individual level and reflects the current realities of working life, a recognition of the power of the team, the 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998), in the development of school improvement practice, could prove transformational. It would require approaches to recruitment, professional development and assessment of performance which recognise the contributions of individuals and the group – perhaps simultaneously, but nevertheless distinct.

PART 4: CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

4.1 Appendices

Appendix 1

The policy background to this study

The 1998 School Standards and Framework Act (GB. Statutes, 1998) broke new ground by defining the responsibilities of local authorities for raising pupils' standards of achievement, in addition to their more traditional responsibilities towards educational provision. The scene was thereby set for a series of changes in the organisation, funding and operation of LEAs. The Code of Practice for LEA–School Relations (DfEE, 2001) outlines these new responsibilities in greater depth, stating that 'schools have front-line responsibility for raising standards', while local authorities 'should aim to support schools in carrying out that responsibility'. Two key areas are highlighted in the Code of Practice as central to the standards agenda: first, school improvement provision and activities, and secondly, the funding of such provision. In particular, LEAs have been assigned the tasks of setting realistic but challenging targets for improvement in schools, monitoring progress against these targets, early intervention and the provision of support as required, and the provision of information and advice on school management, curriculum and pedagogy (OFSTED and Audit Commission, 2000). In addition, each LEA's Education Development Plan should provide 'a clear strategic statement' about the identification and categorisation of schools causing concern, with 'graduated levels of support' to be offered according to different levels of need. The Government has set an 85 per cent target for the delegation of funding for inspection and advisory services to schools, but believes that a 90 per cent target is achievable. Indeed, OFSTED has stated that LEAs should take a minimalist approach with regard to monitoring, challenging and intervening in schools, retaining no more funding than is strictly necessary to fulfil their statutory responsibilities.

The Code of Practice (DfEE, 2001) also highlighted the need for local authorities to monitor, challenge and support their schools. This, in turn, required 'recourse to a relatively small core of high-quality advisory and other professional staff' with practical experience and detailed skills areas such as school management, pedagogy and pupil assessment, data analysis and intervention. It thus urges local authorities to find ways of engaging successful headteachers and deputies to undertake this work, on either a full-time or part-time basis. These respective responsibilities for school improvement were reinforced in October 2000 by the DfEE policy paper, *The Role of the Local Education Authority in School Education*, in which it was stated that 'good schools manage themselves' and that 'authorities only intervene in schools' management in inverse proportion to those schools' success'; and which defined the responsibilities of local authorities towards 'a number of essential functions which cannot and should not be discharged

by individual schools'. During the same period, Building Excellent Schools Together (GB. House of Commons, 1997) provided an agenda for raising standards of achievement in Wales.

The outcome of these various policy developments is that local authorities are now not only expected to provide advice and support on a range of issues, such as school leadership and governance, financial and personnel management, performance management and professional development, supply of school places and admissions, site development, special needs and access; they are additionally expected to challenge schools to improve their teaching and learning practices, and to monitor their progress. Given this broad range of responsibilities, it has become clear that those undertaking school improvement work need a wider range of professional and strategic skills than ever before.

In its policy paper *The Role of the Local Education Authority in School Education* (DfEE, 2000), the Government sets out its view of the LEA's role and proposals for better ways of providing key services to schools. It sees 'the lack of established professional standards for the key school improvement functions of monitoring, challenge and intervention' as 'a serious weakness in current arrangements'. This means that local authorities often have no recognised means for comparing their own services with those of other providers. The Government is thus seeking to establish a national framework with a key aim to 'achieve a step change in the quality of school improvement monitoring and challenge functions,' and to encourage new private and voluntary sector providers into this 'market'. To this end, the Standards and Effectiveness Unit (SEU) published a consultation document entitled *Draft National Standards for Individual School Improvement Staff and Providers of School Improvement Services* in August 2001 (DfES, 2001). The aim of this consultation exercise was to develop a set of definitive standards that school improvement staff will be required to meet in order to gain accreditation, and therefore a 'licence' to operate in the school improvement world.

At much the same time, the National Association of Educational Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants (NAEIAC) published a *National Framework of Competencies for Educational Advisers, Inspectors and Consultants* (NAEIAC, 2001). Drawing on research conducted with NAEIAC's members, the framework of competencies emphasises the interpersonal skills necessary to perform a range of advisory and school improvement roles. The framework additionally supported NAEIAC's drive to promote the training and development of inspectors and advisers. This stands in sharp contrast to the SEU draft document, which implements a top-down structural approach. The document focuses on generic standards and approaches that the DfES believes inspectors and advisers should aim towards, rather than the development of a culture in which the qualities and skills necessary to perform the job well, often in localised circumstances, can be cultivated.

Development of the national standards was ongoing throughout the course of this research study and had not been concluded at the time of writing this

report. During the same period, the wider context for these national standards for school improvement work and of local authority inspection was itself evolving. Preparation for comprehensive performance assessment was begun as a key strand for delivering the recent local government White Paper, *Strong Local Government – Quality Public Services* (Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, 2001). The Audit Commission was given the responsibility to form a judgement by autumn 2002 on every English upper tier authority's performance and capacity to deliver high quality public services. This initiative brought together a range of existing audit, inspection and assessments of individual local government services, to which the new national standards for school improvement work would need to contribute.

Meanwhile, the difficulties surrounding national shortages of teachers and headteachers were frequently in the headlines. The OFSTED report, *Recruitment and Retention of Teachers and Headteachers: Strategies Adopted by LEAs (2002)*, focused upon the issues facing schools and the effectiveness of LEAs' strategies to support schools with effective allocation of resources to meet local needs. At the same time, it highlighted the acceleration of the teacher and headteacher recruitment problems nationally; the long-term prognosis for teacher shortages; and the link between LEAs' capacity to respond and the availability of central government funding. It also found that LEAs were, overall, placing less emphasis upon understanding and addressing issues relating to retention than upon those relating to recruitment. In its conclusions, the report reiterated that national teacher shortages were putting school improvement initiatives at risk.

Appendix 2

A summary of existing empirical research

In addition to the recent NAEAIC survey, a diversity of empirical research has monitored and examined the various policy changes, and their effect on school improvement work. Ainscow *et al.* (2000) provided a useful overview of the changing experiences of LEA advisers and inspectors. They documented the shift in responsibility for driving up standards in schools from LEAs to schools themselves, leaving LEA staff with the residual responsibility to *challenge* schools to improve and to support those which need help. Ainscow *et al.* (2000) therefore argued that LEAs have been placed in an ambiguous position: a position which can lead to uncertainty and stress amongst inspection and advisory staff. In many ways LEAs and their staff are no longer able to control the schools in their authority, and have little control over the ways in which schools spend their school improvement budgets, yet at the same time they are held responsible for schools' failure to 'improve'.

These various changes have led to school improvement staff experiencing a series of tensions regarding their working practices. In particular, Ainscow *et al.* (2000) highlighted a number of ambiguities and uncertainties surrounding inspectors' and advisers' status in schools, in their working styles, in the interests they serve, in the type of working relationships they

encourage with schools, and in the level of input they are now required to give. The result is that school improvement officers are faced with tensions as they draw on their experiences of local conditions to act appropriately, while at the same time they react to external governmental directives (see also Rudd and Davies, 2000). Lodge (2000) argued further, questioning whether the official relationship between LEAs and schools implied by legislation, the relationship of challenge, is likely to promote or hinder school improvement. This is supported by Harris (2000a), who argued that all school improvement work needs to develop in context, in order that it may address the different academic needs and particular stage of development of a school or department. Staff development needs and best practice are both context specific and culturally related. However, such an approach contrasted with the mechanistic approach championed by current policy initiatives because of its understanding that *what works* in schools should take precedence over *what fits* the system (Harris, 2000b).

Schools' expectations and local circumstances can mean that the demands on LEA inspectors and advisers do not necessarily match those supposed by central government. As such, inspectors and advisers can be expected to move between multiple roles (critical friend, professional adviser, inspector, ally, change agent and bearer of challenging messages) as well as trying to achieve a balance between supporting and challenging schools (Derrington, 2000). As LEAs have a duty to address the needs of their local area as well as those of central government, this can, in practice, lead to concealment of the practical realities of LEA school improvement work (Ainscow and Howes, 2001). Allied to questions of schools', and others', perceptions of the role of inspectors and advisers are that of professional credibility. Particularly relevant within this study is the concept of credibility as part of a leadership relationship (Kouzes and Posner, 1993) and the particular credibility which is conferred by having been a headteacher.

Yet, while empirical research has addressed the growing uncertainty about the role of LEAs in school improvement work, little research has focused on the growing uncertainties of those working in, or thinking of working in, the school improvement field. This is surprising given the oft made assumption that those seeking to recruit and retain suitable school improvement staff have experienced a number of difficulties in recent years. As such, it is unclear whether the problems currently associated with the recruitment and retention of advisers and inspectors are as extensive as they are rumoured to be, and, if so, why might this be the case

One potential answer is that inspection and advisory posts are becoming less attractive. In addition to the ambiguities and tensions in the field, outlined above, inspectors and advisers may see their work as 'low key' and unpublicised, thereby underplaying the complexities and tensions inherent in the job. In addition, the work of the inspector/adviser can be lonely due to its peripatetic nature, with little support from other 'team' members. The insights of a recent case study of one LEA (Ainscow and Howes, 2001) certainly suggest that this may be a problem. In particular they highlight the fact that the strengths and high morale of the school

improvement team in their study are founded on strong working links established between its members. These are fostered specifically through regular meetings in which team members can share ideas and provide support for one another.

Another factor outlined in the literature is the uncertainty created by Fair Funding: a new funding framework set out in the School Standards and Framework Act (GB. Statutes, 1998). Under this new framework LEAs are permitted to retain central funding to support their role in specific areas. One such area is school improvement, where LEAs retain a responsibility for the preparation of their Education Development Plan (EDP); to provide for target setting within schools; for monitoring and challenging school performance; and for supporting schools not meeting their targets, or causing concern in other ways.

In many authorities, schools receive delegated funds for buying in curriculum and advisory support. However this has created a number of issues, each of which may potentially add to the difficulties associated with recruiting and pressure. Derrington (2000) highlighted the tensions created by schools' continuing expectation that LEAs would provide a free and comprehensive advisory service despite the delegation of funds. The research, based on interviews with 87 LEA staff (chief education officers and inspectors) in ten LEAs, further suggests that there is no guarantee that schools will buy back LEA services in the longer term. This would leave the future of LEA advisory and inspection work uncertain. Evidence indicates that such fears may not be unfounded. Through a series of surveys of LEA advisory and inspection services, EMIE (the Education Management Information Exchange) (see Dean, 1993, 1994; Mann, 1995; Hendy, 1999) has charted the decline in LEA inspectors and advisers and advisory teachers through the 1990s. In particular the third survey (Mann, 1995) highlighted how LEA support and advice for schoolteachers has significantly diminished due to reduced numbers of posts and the increasing demands placed on inspection and advisory staff. Of the 74 LEAs who responded to the third survey, only two foresaw any increase in staffing levels in the future, while others were cutting and rationalising their services to form consortia whose purpose was to sell advice and/or inspection to LEA schools. Hendy (1999) gave examples of this variation, citing two examples at opposite ends of the spectrum. At that time, Dudley LEA provided an inspector/adviser per 746 pupils, while Bath and NE Somerset LEA provided an inspector/adviser per 6,250 pupils. Further support for this argument came from Dean (1994), who noted that some authorities had no permanent advisory teams, while others had advisory services run along the lines of businesses, selling services to schools.

An additional factor, which could explain the putative recruitment and retention crisis amongst inspection and advisory services, is that moving to become an inspector/adviser is no longer financially beneficial to those with experience of headship and senior management. A review of the salaries and conditions of service available to advisers and inspectors shows that they are now rarely equivalent to those offered by school headships. Indeed

in a survey of 61 LEA chief inspectors, Bird (2000) found that in 96 per cent of LEAs, secondary advisers were paid substantially less than local secondary headteachers. This was further supported by Derrington (2000), who stated that seven LEAs in a research sample of ten described the difficulties of recruiting secondary headteachers into the advice and inspection field. Moreover, three were also experiencing problems with primary recruitment. The reason given for this was that such a move was no longer viewed as promotion, the result of growing pay differentials. In addition, the unwillingness of some governing bodies to release heads and deputies for secondment could potentially provide an additional factor that has negatively impacted on attempts to recruit senior managers from schools.

Furthermore, it would appear that the complex work of challenging schools to raise performance can be seen as an unattractive career move, particularly since the support and advisory aspects of the role have become less prominent in recent years, in favour of more assertive modes of challenge and support to raise standards. The LEA representatives discussed by Derrington (2000) highlighted this issue, arguing that the new role of 'challenge' would discourage those who valued support above inspection.

The fourth EMIE survey (Hendy, 1999) provided support for a number of these theories, indicating that the difficulties in recruiting suitable candidates to adviser/inspector positions resulted from poor morale within the profession and inadequate salary levels. In addition, this survey highlighted the potential effects of devolving the funding of school improvement to schools. In short, greater freedom of choice for schools may undermine the advisory and inspection services further as they are subjected to free market forces.

However, while a number of the studies listed so far indicate the difficulties LEAs may face when recruiting new or retaining existing advisers and inspectors, the ways in which local authorities address these difficulties are less well rehearsed. More particularly, there is little discussion of the training practices which are used by LEAs to initiate and integrate new members of inspection and advisory staff and, perhaps more importantly, the use of continuing professional development activities to help inspectors and advisers to manage and understand their changing roles.

The NAEIAC *National Framework of Competencies for Educational Advisers, Inspectors and Consultants* (2001) went some way towards redressing this neglect. At one level, the document described the nature, scope and detail of inspection and advisory roles, outlining the knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities necessary for individuals to perform their work effectively. At another level, NAEIAC promoted its Framework of Competencies as a resource around which effective induction and continuing professional development activities could be organised and developed. However, while the NAEIAC Framework may prove useful in directing the future training of inspectors and advisers in LEAs, what it could not do was to provide an overview of the various training activities and opportunities currently on offer to LEA inspectors and advisers. Neither

did it address the ways in which existing activities were helping school improvement staff to adapt to the changing demands of their profession.

Ainscow and Howes (2001) provided an insight into the value of training and support activities. While the findings of their research were necessarily limited (based on a case study of one LEA), they indicated the ways in which the inspection and advisory team in that particular authority had adapted to the ever-changing roles they must undertake. In particular they identified a series of processes which have led to the success of the team and a high level of morale amongst its members. To do this they drew on Wenger's (1998) concept, 'communities of practice'. Wenger argued that if a work-based community is to be truly successful, it needs to develop its practices and their implementation in certain ways. In particular, it will have developed practices that include amongst others: support in making it through the day; commiseration about pressures and constraints; and the creation of shared histories and understandings. In the LEA under question, the inspection and advisory team was found to have instituted a weekly meeting which all team members attended as a matter of course. In this setting, experiences and ideas were discussed, best practice was shared and new staff were integrated into the team environment. In turn, this was seen as significant in raising staff morale and creating a cohesive and successful school improvement team described by OFSTED as 'unique and unparalleled'.

While the experiences of these particular inspection and advisory staff could not tell us about the benefits that may ensue from undertaking formal induction and continuing professional development training, they do indicate the importance of the sharing of ideas and experience within a supportive environment – one of the key elements now associated with successful CPD (Lee, 2000).

Looking to the wider perspective of changes in employment and people's working lives, the academic debates which have charted widespread changes in the organisation of work in contemporary Western societies are particularly helpful to this study. Ulrich Beck (1992), one of the most influential thinkers in this field, argued that while the era of the factory and jobs for life is still not totally at an end, their monopoly on the future is being broken. Felstead and Jewson (1999) highlighted two particular changes that are becoming increasingly apparent in the way that Western labour is organised. First, employment is becoming more *precarious* as jobs are more readily terminated through redundancy, downsizing and short-term contracts. Secondly, work is becoming more *contingent* to workers themselves. Many workers now attach a number of personal aims and objectives to their employment, believing that jobs will come to a natural end when these are reached.

It is therefore unclear how far the retention problems highlighted above can be seen as a product of the specific difficulties associated with inspection and advisory work, and its lack of clear career structure, and how far they reflect wider employment shifts in contemporary society.

Appendix 3

The research design and methodology

The methods used in this project were designed to meet the specific objectives of the research, which, to recap briefly, are: to identify and quantify the difficulties being faced in relation to recruitment, retention and training of local authority school improvement staff; to focus upon the strategies being adopted within LEAs to overcome these problems; and to offer detailed examples of best practice in the recruitment, retention and training of school improvement staff.

The literature review

Our first step was to conduct a literature review. The purpose of this review was twofold: to provide an exploration and overview of current debates, issues and policies surrounding school improvement work, including discussion of the status, roles and experiences of inspection and advisory staff; and to inform the development of questionnaire and case-study interview schedules. Whilst a key aim of the project was to identify evidence of good practice since the implementation of the School Standards and Framework Act (GB. Statutes, 1998), the literature search was not confined to any specific year of publication. However, research documented post 1998 was deemed to be most pertinent to our own study. Obtaining material for the literature review was not easy, possibly due to the low political profile or modest interest that members of local authority school improvement staff attract. As mentioned in the background section of this report, there has been limited empirical research on the experiences and perceptions of those working, or contemplating work, within the school improvement area. The limited range of research and policy documents in the field therefore provides evidence of the timeliness of this research and the gaps in our existing knowledge of the subject area.

The LEA questionnaire survey

Our next aim was to provide an overview of current corporate structures, conditions, experiences and practices within a nation-wide sample of inspection and advisory services. In particular, we wished to ascertain whether problems in the recruitment and retention of inspection and advisory staff were indeed a reality, why these problems were perceived to exist and whether, in the light of these problems, any particular strategies (such as involvement in collaborative projects and use of external providers) were being adopted. In addition, and related to this, we wished to investigate examples of best practice with regard to training and continuous professional development in inspection and advisory services.

To gain this information, we designed a postal questionnaire to be completed by local authority chief inspectors, chief advisers, heads of school improvement or their equivalent. This particular research instrument suited our need to gather both factual and perceptual information, on a variety of topics, and from a sample spread across England and Wales. As well as aiming to quantify the difficulties being faced in relation to recruitment

and retention of school improvement staff, the questionnaire focused on strategies being adopted to overcome these and to provide effective professional development and support to existing staff. In addition, the research coincided with EMIE's (Education Management Information Exchange) fifth survey of LEA advisory and inspection services (Arnold, 2002; Dean, 1993, 1994; Mann, 1995; Hendy, 1999), for which a questionnaire was also required. A joint questionnaire between EMIE and the NFER prevented the production of two separate requests for information, which would have posed closely related questions to the same respondents. Further, we felt that a joint questionnaire would enhance efficiency and remove the potential of any negative effects on response rates.

Because of the joint nature of the study, questions were formulated in consultation with EMIE and the project advisory group. In order to elicit both quantitative and qualitative information from the respondents, the questionnaire contained open-ended as well as closed questions. These were then arranged under five headings:

- ◆ Local definitions of school improvement
- ◆ Staffing for school improvement
- ◆ Recruitment and retention of school improvement staff
- ◆ Training of local authority school improvement staff and
- ◆ Resourcing advice, inspection and school improvement services funding.

The resulting questionnaire was sent out in the autumn of 2001 via electronic mail and post to representatives of the 180 local authorities in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, Guernsey and Jersey.

This NFER report focuses mainly on the sections relating to the recruitment, retention and training of school improvement staff and identifies any changes that have occurred since the School Standards and Framework Act (GB. Statutes, 1998) came into force. The report published by EMIE (Arnold, 2002) has used information from the questionnaire responses as a whole and has reported in greater detail on issues concerned with staffing and resources, for example, than this study has done.

Respondents were given the choice of completing the questionnaire either by hand or as an email attachment and reminder messages were sent by email to those who had not returned the questionnaire by a given date. Completed questionnaires were received from 42 LEAs (33 questionnaires were completed by hand and nine as email attachments), giving a response rate of 22 per cent of all LEAs in Great Britain excluding Scotland, or 24 per cent of those in England and Wales.

In view of this low response rate, and the fact that metropolitan authorities were under-represented in the achieved sample for the survey, it would be unwise to assume that the responses from the 42 LEAs that returned

questionnaires are representative of all LEAs in England and Wales. Nevertheless, the results of the survey have provided us with some interesting insights that support and extend the findings of the case studies on the key issues involved in the recruitment, retention and training of school improvement staff.

The case study interviews

In addition to the quantitative data collected through the questionnaires, we collected qualitative data through case study interviews in 12 local authorities. Volunteers were invited to put themselves forward through completion of the questionnaire. In deciding which authorities to invite to take part, consideration was given to the desire to obtain a reasonable mix of local education authority types. In particular we wished to take into account geographic location, authority type (shire counties and unitary authorities, metropolitan and London boroughs) and whether the LEAs appeared to be generating particularly interesting and/or innovative practices.

The balance of authorities volunteering initially to take part in the study did not match sufficiently our overall criteria for inclusion. For example, none of the early volunteers were either metropolitan or London authorities. We decided, therefore, to make direct contact with authorities under-represented so far, particularly in London: with the result, happily, that the case study authorities came to cover a range in terms of geography, size and type. These 12 LEAs represented seven shire counties, three London boroughs and two Welsh authorities. Of these 12, all but two had been subject to reorganisation during local government review of the 1990s.

In each case study area, we aimed to interview the chief adviser/inspector or head of school improvement services (or equivalent), a range of advisers, some of whom were new to the work, some long-standing and others who held particular responsibilities for work of interest to the study, such as attached/link advisory work or team CPD. In addition we aimed to interview at least one secondary and one primary phase headteacher in each area to discuss their experiences: either as users of inspection and advisory services or as providers of school improvement support.

Interviews were conducted in confidence and on the understanding that the final report would not identify individuals or authorities. The purpose of these interviews was to gather illustrative and in-depth, information about the study's key themes; and, importantly, to provide a localised account of the current experiences and perceptions of school improvement staff. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were designed to allow the participants to explore the context and culture-specific nature of their school improvement work. The work of Harris (2000a and b) supports this approach, revealing that policy implementation, staff development needs and best practice should be viewed as both context-specific and culturally related.

A total of 75 interviews were undertaken. Of these, 47 were with school improvement team members (advisers) and 25 with headteachers. Three

interviews were conducted with managers of school improvement services from the private sector. The management perspective was provided by assistant directors, chief inspectors, chief advisers and heads of school improvement. The LEA school improvement team member perspective was provided by advisers and inspectors; consultants appointed under the national strategies for literacy, numeracy and key stage 3; and headteachers seconded or working as associate inspectors within LEA school improvement teams. The schools' perspective was provided by headteachers of primary, middle and secondary schools.

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