Local Government Association

the LEA contribution to school improvement – a role worth fighting for

by Chris Derrington, National Foundation for Educational Research

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– a role worth fighting for

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Local Government Association

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The aims of this study were to investigate the changing role and functions of LEAs in the light of recent Government initiatives and to examine, in particular, the part played by LEAs in raising standards in schools. LEAs are charged with a broad remit, though the focus on school improvement has, perhaps inevitably, become a key aspect of their role in the current political climate. The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (GB. Statutes, 1998) places a duty on LEAs to raise standards in schools, and the Code of Practice on LEA–School Relations (GB. DfEE, 1999a) describes how LEAs (and schools) should work together to discharge their respective responsibilities. Furthermore, the contribution made by LEAs to the achievement of this national target is now monitored and evaluated both by OFSTED and by the DfEE's Standards and Effectiveness Unit (through the introduction of Education Development Plans). With the consolidation of these and other central initiatives has come the recognition that LEAs must either respond, as a matter of urgency, to the national agenda or risk becoming sidelined in the process.

The broad research questions were:

- **What are the opportunities and challenges associated with the revised LEA role?**
- **How is the LEAs' contribution to raising standards measured and evaluated?**

Methodology

The study was carried out as part of the Local Government Association Educational Research Programme. The focus of the research was primarily on the impact of recent legislation and regulations on the revised role of LEAs and school improvement. In order to examine a range of perceptions in sufficient depth, a case study approach was used, involving a cross-section of ten LEAs.

The research programme was carried out between spring 1999 and spring 2000 and comprised three phases:

1. A review of relevant literature, including OFSTED LEA inspection reports, and informal discussions with a small number of Directors of Education.
2. Case studies in ten LEAs, representing a cross-section of areas and types. Interviews with a range of officers in each LEA, reaching a total of 87 interviewees.

3. In-depth interviews with a range of staff in 28 schools, across the ten case study LEAs. Altogether, 100 school staff and governors were interviewed.

Main findings

It is clear from the findings of this study that although the Code of Practice may have given local education authorities a new sense of purpose, it has also challenged them not only to raise standards in schools (over which they have little control), but also to provide evidence of the impact of their contributions to enhanced pupil performance. The main findings are summarised below.

Schools value LEA support

A key finding was that more than half of the 100 school staff and governors who were interviewed believed that *all* schools needed LEAs to help them improve and only five maintained that schools, in general, were capable of improving without LEA support.

In order for schools (and particularly primary schools) to focus their efforts on the pressing objective of raising standards, there was a strong reliance on LEAs to provide a wide range of support for school management. The overwhelming majority of governors and primary headteachers participating in this study believed that LEA support was essential in this respect. The fact that LEAs have a vested interest in, and a shared statutory responsibility for, school improvement generated a collegial sense of either culpability or pride in the performance of a school. While larger secondary schools had greater in-school capacity to be self-sufficient, the research data suggest that teachers in these schools are also apprehensive about the prospect of the professional isolation that could ensue from less contact with the LEA.

Important LEA support is often 'low-key' and unpublicised

The evidence suggests that LEA officers and advisers provide a good deal more support to schools than perhaps they are given credit for. The present study identified a number of examples of LEA activity, which can be characterised as 'low-key' support. For instance, LEA officers and advisers generally exhibited a strong sense of professional loyalty to their schools and this was exemplified by their determination to protect schools from adverse publicity. Similarly, although LEAs concurred fully with the Government's stance on zero tolerance for under-achieving schools, their interventions were necessarily discreet. The provision of support for headteachers was also handled with sensitivity, so that in some cases other staff in the school were unaware of the input made by the LEA adviser – a fact which has obvious implications for any overall evaluation of the LEA contribution.

In order to discharge their statutory responsibilities effectively, LEAs require corresponding levels of empowerment

Ultimately, it is governing bodies who hold the responsibility for what happens in schools and while LEA officers agreed in principle with the development of increased delegation of funds, there was a perceived contradiction between Fair Funding arrangements and LEAs' statutory duties. In addition, the requirements for LEAs to disseminate information on best practice, to know schools well and to improve the quality of teaching were all seen to conflict with the strictures pertaining to intervention in inverse proportion to success.

OFSTED (2000) suggests that many LEAs fail to understand the required balance of support and challenge and do not always implement the principle of intervention in inverse proportion to success in their interactions with schools. However, the LEA advisers who were interviewed as part of the study felt comfortable with both the principle and with their own practice in this respect. Headteachers and governors responded to the approach in a more guarded way. The evidence suggests that more time may be required for trusting relationships to be developed between headteachers and their link advisers but that this is unlikely to be achieved unless there are sufficient opportunities for regular and meaningful dialogue. Teachers felt that LEA advisers should be more visible in schools and more accessible.

Furthermore, although LEA advisers appreciated the need for desk-based data analysis, for monitoring school performance, the consensus was that, in order to monitor all schools effectively, a cycle of routine visits was also necessary. The common perception was that there are too many variables (that influence school improvement) and not all of these can be identified effectively by paper-based analysis.

LEAs have a duty to address local, as well as national, priorities and are likely to vary in their capacity to embrace the revised role at the same pace

There are multifarious factors that can affect an LEA's capacity to implement the newly defined role at the required pace. Since all LEAs operate within their own unique local context, it is hardly surprising that top-down initiatives are implemented in ways that reflect local circumstances. Furthermore, effective change takes time to implement.

The research data suggest, for example, that despite the publication of the Code of Practice, schools' expectations about the LEA role do not necessarily match those of central government. LEAs therefore may find themselves being pulled in two different directions. The messages from central government are clear but unless LEAs are seen to respond to local needs, as well as national priorities, genuine partnership with schools is unlikely to be achieved.

While the LEA contribution to school improvement can be evaluated in terms of the quality of processes and relationships, it may be unrealistic to attempt to assess its impact on pupil outcomes

The introduction of LEA inspections by OFSTED has excited much debate about the way in which LEA performance is evaluated and judged. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of a contribution made by any partner, it is necessary first, to isolate that contribution in some way. This study found that although the majority of interviewees in schools confirmed that their LEA made a necessary contribution to school improvement, it was difficult for them to assess its impact because the nature of the LEA support they described was largely '*indirect*'. Furthermore, if there was genuine partnership, it was extremely difficult to disentangle each partner's contribution to success. LEA officers and advisers corroborated this perspective and accepted that there was a great reliance on schools to recognise and appreciate the LEA contribution. The area of LEA activity that is perhaps more easily measured in terms of outcome is that which is related to those schools in most difficulty.

Conclusion

It might be argued that it is unreasonable to attempt to quantify change in pupil performance output until the change effort has had time to take effect. LEAs believed that the emphasis in evaluation should, in the immediate term, be focused on the '*processes*' (of service delivery and the building of partnerships) rather than the '*output*' (the impact of the LEA contribution of pupil performance targets). Providing the processes are right, they might reasonably be expected to have a positive impact on output.

Proving added value, in terms of output, was perceived to be fundamentally more problematic, requiring a longer period of evaluation. However, LEAs do not have time on their side. The Government course has been set and LEAs must respond accordingly in order to secure their future role. The pressure, therefore, is on local education authorities themselves to try to develop rigorous systems (in consultation with schools) that can measure their contribution to school improvement. The findings of this study demonstrate that LEAs are trying to meet this challenge by seeking to provide evidence of their achievements, taking account not only of progress which can be reported in quantitative terms but also of good practice of a more qualitative nature. The wide range of support provided by LEAs, as documented in this report, indicates clearly that the continuing role of LEAs in school improvement is a role worth fighting for.

1. ABOUT THE RESEARCH

1.1 Introduction

The role of the LEA has changed significantly during the past decade, owing to shifts in the balance of control over schools. After 18 years of Conservative rule, during which time the role of local education authorities was consistently under threat, the newly elected Labour Government (in 1997) declared that education was to be its top priority. Whilst this pledge encouraged a new wave of hope and optimism, some of the proposed changes received a guarded response from educationists. However, several of the new Ministers had their roots in local government and there was talk of fresh partnerships with local education authorities as part of the national 'crusade' to raise standards in schools.

While the onus was placed firmly on schools to take responsibility for their own improvement, a combination of support and pressure from both central and local government was envisaged which would stimulate and challenge this ongoing process. The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (GB. Statutes, 1998) placed a duty on LEAs to promote high standards in schools and the Code of Practice on LEA–School Relations (GB. DfEE, 1999a) described the ways in which LEAs should discharge this responsibility. Furthermore, the contribution made by LEAs (in the process of raising educational standards) was to be monitored by the DfEE's Standards and Effectiveness Unit (through the introduction of Education Development Plans), supported by a programme of OFSTED inspections. In addition, as part of the new administration's intention to 'modernise' local government, the Best Value initiative was introduced in the Local Government Act 1999 (GB. Statutes, 1999). This placed a statutory duty on local authorities to secure continuous improvement of all services (including education).

The Government's White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (GB. Parliament. House of Commons, 1997) described the revised role of LEAs as '*constructive*' but warned that it was not to be one of '*control*'. Moreover, it gave a stern reminder that where LEAs failed to discharge their responsibilities effectively, the principle of zero tolerance would be '*adhered to unflinchingly*'. In other words, like schools, local education authorities that failed to achieve the required standards must expect formal intervention. The twin strategy of support and challenge for schools, therefore, applies equally to LEAs and there is a clear expectation for all LEAs to contribute to the priority of driving up standards and to be fully accountable for their actions.

There can be little doubt that the future of LEAs is clearly dependent upon their ability to administer this challenging new role effectively and efficiently. To date, more than 60 LEAs have been inspected by OFSTED. The latest Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools

(OFSTED, 2000) suggests that (on the evidence of the 41 LEAs inspected by September 1999) two in five LEAs were '*seriously deficient*' in some respects. Four LEAs were considered to require formal intervention by the Secretary of State and a further 12 received highly critical reports which demanded urgent action. Unlike school inspection reports, there are no established criteria to determine these categorisations. The quality of an LEA's advice and inspection service was judged to be the largest single influencing factor in relation to the effectiveness of LEAs.

The present study set out to investigate the changing role and functions of LEAs in the light of recent Government initiatives, to examine the part played by LEAs in raising standards in schools and to consider how the LEAs' contribution is evaluated.

1.2 Methodology

The NFER study was commissioned by the Local Government Association, as part of its Educational Research Programme. The focus of the research was primarily on the impact of recent legislation and regulations on the revised role of LEAs and school improvement. In order to examine a range of perceptions in sufficient depth, a case study approach was used, involving a cross-section of ten LEAs. The research programme comprised three phases.

Phase One

The first phase took place in the spring term of 1999 and involved desk research, including the scrutiny of a range of OFSTED LEA inspection reports. In addition, a programme of informal discussions with Directors of Education in a small number of LEAs (that were not subsequently included as case studies) was held, in order to help identify issues for further investigation and to inform the design of the LEA interview schedules.

Phase Two

Phase Two of the study took place in the summer term of 1999. A cross-section of ten local education authorities was invited to participate in the study. The sample included a mix of London boroughs, shire counties, metropolitan boroughs and unitary authorities. Of the LEAs that participated in the study, three had been inspected by OFSTED prior to the NFER visit. A fourth was inspected in the course of the research programme. The location of the LEAs in the sample took account of a wide geographical spread and included urban and rural, large and small LEAs. None of the LEAs in the sample had relinquished control of their services to private contractors at the time of the research.

Researchers spent two days interviewing a range of officers in each LEA. In total, 80 face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted in this phase, involving 87 interviewees (a few participants chose to be interviewed in pairs). One interview was conducted by telephone. Each interview lasted between one and two hours and almost all interviews were tape-recorded. The table below shows a breakdown of the LEA interviewees:

Table 1.1 Number and type of LEA interviewees

Type of LEA interviewee	Number interviewed
Director of Education	10
Elected member	13
Senior officer/school effectiveness	16
Link adviser/inspector	17
Governor support officer	10
Information/statistics officer	11
Literacy manager/consultant	10
TOTAL NUMBER INTERVIEWED	**87**

In addition, a wide range of documentation including Education Development Plans (EDPs) was collected and analysed alongside the interview transcripts.

Phase Three

Phase Three of the research was conducted between September and December 1999. The purpose of this phase was to gain a wider perspective from schools, in each of the ten LEAs, about the impact of the changing LEA role. It should be noted that the sample of schools was not randomly selected and cannot, therefore, be treated as representative in a statistical sense. LEA officers were asked to supply the NFER researchers with a selection of schools in each phase, indicating relative levels of LEA support in each case. From this, a sample of schools was then invited by the research team to participate in the study. A total of 28 schools, across the ten case study LEAs, was involved in Phase Three of the research. In each school, a cross-section of staff was interviewed in depth, in order to provide a valuable, multi-perspective account of the impact at school level. In total, 100 school staff and governors were interviewed as part of this study. Tables 1.2 to 1.5 below provide further background information about the schools and the range of interviewees who took part.

Table 1.2 Relative levels of LEA support

	Low level of LEA support	Average level of LEA support	Formerly high level (schools just out of SM* or SW**)	Currently high level (schools in SM* or SW**)	TOTAL
Primary	6	3	3	1	**13**
Secondary	4	4	2	0	**10**
Special	2	1	2	0	**5**

SM* = special measures SW** = serious weaknesses

Table 1.3 Characteristics of the 10 secondary schools in the sample

Mixed comprehensive	6
Single-sex comprehensive	2
Single-sex selective	2
Former grant-maintained	2
Rural	5
Urban	5
Number on roll less than 600	3
Number on roll between 600–1,200	5
Number on roll over 1,200	2
Head in post less than three years	4

Table 1.4 Characteristics of the 13 primary schools in the sample

Combined primary	7
First school	3
Combined first and middle	3
Former grant-maintained	0
Rural	7
Urban	6
Number on roll less than 150	5
Number on roll over 150	8
Head in post less than three years	4

Of the five special schools in the study, two catered for pupils with severe learning difficulties across all key stages, one was a school for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties (KS3–4) and the other had a mixed intake of pupils representing a wide spectrum of learning difficulties at all key stages. The range of staff and governors interviewed is shown in Table 1.5.

Table 1.5 Posts held by school interviewees

Head teacher, primary	13
Head teacher, secondary	10
Head teacher, special	5
Deputy head, primary	2
Deputy head, secondary	9
Deputy head, special	2
Assessment coordinator, primary	2
Assessment coordinator, special	2
Head of data/statistics (not deputy head), secondary	1
Literacy coordinator, primary	11
Literacy coordinator, special	5
Head of maths, secondary	6
Head of English, secondary	3
Head of science, secondary	5
Head of other department, secondary	4
Governor, primary	11
Governor, secondary	10
Governor, special	5
Total number of people interviewed	**100**

Note: The above totals do not add up to 100 as six interviewees had dual roles.

The information provided and the views expressed by the participants in the research form the basis for this report. Reference to their comments and direct quotations are made according to the focus of each section.

1.3 The structure of the report

Owing to the complexity of the research brief, there is a certain amount of overlap between the various sections. Summary points are presented at the end of each chapter.

Chapter 2 considers the range of factors that might affect an LEA's capacity to respond quickly to the national agenda and looks at the implications of certain national priorities and aspects of the policy framework. Chapter 3 focuses on the way in which LEAs monitor and challenge schools and considers the central role of the link adviser. The wide range of support that LEAs provide, in order to help schools improve, is discussed in Chapter 4 and specific support and intervention for schools causing concern is examined in Chapter 5.

Chapter 6 is concerned with the way in which the LEA contribution is evaluated by different stakeholders. It reports on the overall perspectives of school staff and governors and explores how LEA officers evaluate their own effectiveness in terms of helping schools to improve.

The final chapter summarises the main findings and highlights the tensions between schools, LEAs and central government inherent in the current structures. It also offers some practical suggestions for clarifying the rights and responsibilities of all parties.

2. POLICY AND CONTEXT

This chapter considers a range of factors that might affect an LEA's capacity to respond quickly to the national agenda. It explores the perceptions of LEA and school interviewees in relation to the impact of certain national priorities and aspects of the policy framework, within which LEAs are required to operate. These are:

- the introduction of Fair Funding
- the requirement to produce Education Development Plans (EDPs)
- the target-setting agenda, and
- the principle of inclusion.

2.1 Background

The White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (GB. Parliament. House of Commons, 1997) describes education as the present Government's top priority. It sets out a vision of partnership that is necessary to promote the high standards required for a world-class education system. While schools have responsibility for their own improvement, LEAs have a statutory duty to promote high standards. The contribution made by LEAs (in the process of raising educational standards) is now monitored by both the DfEE's Standards and Effectiveness Unit and OFSTED and there is a clear expectation for all LEAs to contribute to the priority of driving up standards and to be fully accountable for their actions. However, although the LEA role itself may have been clarified, the White Paper acknowledges that:

> '*LEAs must earn their place in the new partnership*'.
> (GB. Parliament. House of Commons, 1997. p. 69)

This suggests a strong element of challenge for LEAs, particularly since levels of influence over schools have been diminished during the past decade. According to the Audit Commission (1999), LEAs '*vary in their preparedness for the challenges that lie ahead*'.

Interestingly, the direction of the steer from central government, in terms of its priorities for education in particular and Best Value more generally, was largely accepted as being appropriate (either explicitly or more tacitly) by LEA interviewees in this study, regardless of the political composition of the council. There was evidence too of hung councils working in collaboration to meet shared priorities and a general commitment to protect education budgets and raise standards in schools.

Notwithstanding this suggestion of apparent political consensus, there has to be recognition that all LEAs operate within their own uniquely local context. So, while there may be a nationally and locally shared vision of improved educational standards, there are many interrelated variables which inevitably impact upon an LEA's capacity to execute the revised LEA role as envisaged by central government. Some of these are discussed below. Also, throughout this report, perceptions of staff and governors in schools indicate expectations of the LEA which are discordant with those held by central government. Put simply, they wanted different things. This suggests that LEAs may find themselves in a 'no-win' situation, or, as one secondary school teacher put it: '*LEAs are caught between a rock and a hard place.*'

There was an underlying acceptance (by schools) that LEAs were having to operate under difficult circumstances and were '*very much on trial*' in terms of their future position. Consequently, despite some criticisms, schools showed a considerable amount of empathy when weighing up the situation.

> '*The initiatives are coming down thick and fast and they [the LEA] have to come back and deliver them to us almost the following day. The LEA are giving the party line but it's obvious that they are being told what to say*' (primary head).

2.2 Preparation for change

The sheer weight of educational reform during recent years has meant that local education authorities have necessarily undergone many reviews. The ability of LEAs to reposition themselves to meet the Government's expectations of the new LEA role may depend on a number of contextual and historical factors. The introduction of local management of schools (LMS) in the Education Reform Act 1988 (GB. Statutes, 1988) impacted directly on the structure of centralised services but LEAs responded to this in different ways. Some retained cohesive services whereas others, which made significant cuts at the centre, subsequently found it necessary to recruit staff in order to fulfil their statutory monitoring role (see Chapter 3). An elected member in one LEA that had responded to LMS by delegating a higher proportion of the Potential Schools Budget than many others, observed:

> '*It left very little at the centre to play with. It left us very lean on the ground so we have had to start again from a very low baseline to build the advisory service up again.*'

By comparison, in another LEA that had retained its core services, an adviser commented:

> '*While some LEAs jumped on the bandwagon and sold everybody off as though LEAs were going to close down, we didn't go down that route. I think the reason we still have a team this big is through good management and vision*' (senior adviser).

More recently, the flow of local government reorganisation has coincided with several major national initiatives and it may be, for example, that new or recently reorganised local authorities are better placed to implement an array of necessary changes. A new start usually provides the opportunity of establishing a new culture and this was felt, by some interviewees, to be advantageous in implementing the national school improvement agenda. However, as one Director explained, new authorities had to balance twin goals. One aim was to become operational in a seamless way; the other was to make a difference. Although it was important to achieve the second goal very quickly, the first was vital.

At the same time, small new unitary authorities also had to establish both credibility and the understanding that they would not be able to provide everything that schools might expect of them. Some interviewees spoke about the impact of the timing and observed that it had been very taxing to be faced with so many new initiatives upon the reorganisation of the LEA. Also, where new LEAs had inherited a large number of 'failing' schools, measures to address this took a great deal of time and resources away from other aspects of the school improvement plan.

In some cases, local government reorganisation brought with it the added bonus of a larger budget share to an urban area than was formerly the case. This in itself could help to cement initial relationships by raising schools' opinion of the new LEA. Such was the appreciation of schools in one case, the Director felt he could '*walk on water for a while!*' The opposite effect, however, left reorganised shire authorities feeling demoralised because of the considerable cuts that needed to be made in the overall budget.

Geographical and demographic features may also affect the implementation of the new LEA role. Interviewees gave conflicting views about the relative merits and disadvantages of belonging to a large or small LEA. Some participants in the schools that were visited argued that small LEAs were able to be more responsive to local needs, whereas others believed that a larger authority was advantageous because it could provide a more comprehensive and cohesive model of support. These views did not necessarily correspond to the LEA type that interviewees currently worked in. In some cases, comparative assessments were based on experience prior to local government reorganisation (LGR). Others were based on speculation. It was recognised, however, that smaller LEAs needed to appoint and deploy staff who were multi-skilled and one effect of this appeared to be a merging of the traditional officer/adviser division. Not only was this considered to be a pragmatic solution, it was also helpful in creating a culture of collective responsibility and it was quite common for link advisers to have responsibility for a strategic aspect as part of their overall brief.

Small LEAs were perceived as effective brokers provided there was a 'near neighbour' that was able to supplement support for the curriculum. In two small LEAs, the focus of LEA curriculum support was aimed predominantly

at the primary sector. This left secondary schools feeling that the LEA was not meeting their particular needs (even though the quality of LEA personnel was rated highly and the more positive relationship with all schools was appreciated).

> '*I have a lot of time for a lot of the people who work in the LEA. I think that they are very able people but I think that this LEA is too small to be effective. And unfortunately by keeping central costs down and delegating money out to the schools they have managed to put themselves into a position where they haven't got enough money to provide a service that people think is good. So you have got all of these really good people running around but you haven't got enough of them. They have all got too much to do so they end up not doing anything properly*' (secondary headteacher).

Particular problems were identified in large, rural geographical areas with relatively small LEA teams. In these cases, regional officers had oversight of a large number of schools and link advisers were given a relatively large number of schools to monitor (see Chapter 3). Although these LEAs were attempting to provide a responsive service, and schools appreciated this, the capacity to provide the support that schools wanted was clearly weakened.

The quality of the relationship between LEAs and schools is central to the Government's vision of partnership. This may be particularly pertinent in areas where large numbers of schools formerly opted for grant maintained (GM) status and LEAs may find themselves operating in a weaker sphere of influence. It was also considered more difficult to implement the new role quickly where LEAs had made a major contribution to the early programme of school OFSTED inspections and, as a result, lost contact with their own schools. In such cases, the strengthening of that relationship was likely to be identified as a primary focus. Some advisers described how they had felt disadvantaged initially because the LEA did not know its schools well enough and relationships had to be developed quickly. Where LEAs had become distanced from their schools, headteachers rejected the renewed level of interest being shown. In one former GM school, LEA contact was interpreted as an attempt (by the LEA) to claw back control and, therefore, everything else that the school had fought against prior to opting out of LEA control some years before.

Although there are similarities between LEAs, each is unique in terms of its history, geography, culture and population. It is unlikely, therefore, that all will find themselves in the best starting position to embrace and implement the new role. However, LEAs that had been forward-looking and that had anticipated aspects of the new role and then set structures in place accordingly considered themselves as having a distinct advantage.

2.3 Fair Funding

Between May and July 1998, LEAs and schools were invited to comment on outline proposals for further delegation in the paper entitled *Fair Funding: Improving Delegation to Schools* (GB. DfEE, 1998). In September of that year, the Government published its decision in the light of this consultation exercise. In short, the outcome was that the new funding framework would be placed on the statute under sections 45 to 53 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (GB. Statutes, 1998) and an extra billion pounds would be delegated to schools (or would fall within optional delegation arrangements) by the year 2000. It was also confirmed that the Government intended to publish data on LEA central expenditure on a league table basis, so that the comparative performance by different LEAs could be assessed.

Under Fair Funding arrangements, LEAs are permitted to retain central funding to support their role in four key areas:

- **Strategic management** (personnel, corporate planning, finance, legal services, IT services, grants)
- **Access** (monitoring performance, planning of school places, admissions, transport, education welfare, etc.)
- **School improvement** (preparation of the LEA's EDP including negotiation of targets with schools, monitoring and challenging school performance, support for schools causing concern)
- **Special educational needs** (statutory assessment administration and review of statements, Educational Psychology services, monitoring of schools' arrangements, SEN support services, and some funding which may need to be retained for stages 1–3 and provision specified in statements).

The implication for schools is that they will (or may) receive additional delegated funding for:

- building repairs and maintenance
- school meals
- management support (e.g. payroll and personnel)
- curriculum and advisory services (other than those essential for school improvement plans)
- supply cover
- designated SEN units
- library services.

Although Fair Funding arrangements were at an early stage of implementation at the time of this research, LEA and school interviewees were invited to offer their views on this development and were asked to

assess the likely impact of the new funding arrangements on the LEA–school relationship. Their responses highlighted the fact that while secondary schools generally welcomed the level of increased delegation, the Fair Funding model was not necessarily what primary schools or governors wanted. Furthermore, the constraints brought about by the speed at which the new funding arrangements were introduced meant that some schools and LEAs felt ill-prepared for the changes. A number of issues were raised by interviewees, and it is worth considering these here.

LEA views

Officers and elected members in the participating LEAs supported the general principle of increased delegation to schools and the vast majority predicted that Fair Funding arrangements would not have a significant impact on the LEA as there was already a high level of delegation. However, it was widely acknowledged that the first year of the implementation was a 'testing-out' time for schools and there was no suggestion of complacency amongst LEA interviewees in relation to the (then) current level of buy-back. LEAs realised that schools had effectively been denied the luxury of time to 'shop around' in the first year. This uncertainty brought mixed blessings.

On the positive side, it had prompted most LEAs to analyse critically aspects of quality assurance and encouraged open dialogue between LEAs (as providers) and schools (as potential purchasers).

> '*I told the schools that we had to find a different way of working together. I said* [to the schools]*: "You want a good LEA, we are looking to be a good LEA, so let's get together. You tell us what you want." We had to offer discounts and packages to make it more attractive because we need schools to buy if we are going to improve*' (new Director).

> '*A lot of work was done to assess customer satisfaction of services. We asked schools what improvements they would like to see. I think if we hadn't done that, the buy-back level would have been lower. We had a big exhibition of all the services before they made a decision. The governors and heads could come along and actually talk to the deliverers about their particular needs. So, we were able to be more responsive in that sense. It was a way of testing our products*' (elected member, new LEA).

On the other hand, there was genuine anxiety about the viability of existing LEA staffing levels. Fair Funding was perceived by some to be a test of the quality of relationships between schools and their LEA. Also, the move towards greater transparency of spending was perceived as a healthy, if not entirely comfortable, exercise.

The main concerns identified by LEA interviewees are summarised below:

- Some perceived a fundamental contradiction between Fair Funding and the statutory duty placed on LEAs to raise standards. These interviewees felt that LEAs were caught in the trap of having a legal responsibility without the necessary corresponding level of power.
- There was currently no recognised system or mechanism to monitor the quality of externally provided services. Also, schools might be discouraged from buying curriculum support from LEAs if there was a perception that advisers might use this as an opportunity to form overall judgements about the school's performance.
- If some schools opted out of LEA services, there could be a viability issue. Loss of economies of scale could lead to fragmented provision and potentially damage relationships between schools.
- Fair Funding was perceived as an attempt to apply the GM model to all schools but not all schools were considered to have the in-school management capacity to deal with the required range of additional administrative responsibilities. This might lead to overload for headteachers and governors.
- The Government's consultation process was described by some interviewees as inadequate and superficial in terms of both the timescale and the perceived lack of opportunity to influence the outcome. There was speculation that decisions had already been made by central government.
- In some LEAs, there was a culture of dependency whereby schools expected LEAs to continue providing services 'free' even though funds had been delegated. It was anticipated that a period of adjustment would be necessary.
- In more remote LEAs where the choice of external provision was limited, the new funding arrangements were perceived as bureaucratic and amounted to an unwelcome system of 'phantom transfers'.
- The media 'spin' that had been put on the prospect of increased delegation had led to false expectations in the case of some schools (which assumed the entire education budget was going to be delegated). Also, the prevailing assumption that LEAs were failing to '*passport*' money intended for schools and preferred to '*squirrel it away*' at the centre was unhelpful.
- Comparison between LEA spending patterns was likely to be unreliable for the first few years until all authorities were clear about which costs could be apportioned to the different headings.

School views

By and large, most (but not all) secondary school headteachers who were interviewed, welcomed the culture of increased delegation as it was perceived to offer greater freedom and choice. This view, however, was not commonly shared by their primary school colleagues or by the chairs of governors across the phases. Special school headteachers were still reserving judgement about the prospect of Fair Funding. The most common perceptions are outlined below:

Overload

The greatest concerns were that increased delegation might ultimately place an unacceptable level of burden and responsibility upon governors, and that some, smaller schools (or those experiencing difficulties) would have insufficient human and financial capacity to cope with the extra range of demands brought about by Fair Funding arrangements (see also Tipple, 1998). Primary school governors reiterated the fact that they were unpaid volunteers with neither the time nor the expertise to research and evaluate the wider market. The onus of considering the alternatives, therefore, might well fall upon headteachers.

The majority of primary heads in this study simply did not want that additional responsibility. This was also true of headteachers of schools in (or recently out of) special measures or serious weaknesses.

> '*At the moment, that is just another pressure we don't need*' (secondary headteacher, former SM).

The reasons that were given were mainly related to time pressures, insufficient resources, or, in a minority of cases, a lack of confidence. A number of interviewees were concerned that further delegation would take them away from their fundamental role in school. Three headteachers of medium-sized and successful primary schools explained why they had opted to continue purchasing services from their LEAs:

> '*I am a headteacher and not in the slightest bit interested in kitchens or drains or insurance packages – I want someone else to deal with all that.*'
>
> '*I don't want to be taken away from classrooms any more than I already am because that should be my main function.*'
>
> '*I would rather it had been left alone. I didn't want the LEA to delegate this money. I wanted them to provide the service. The secondary schools want it* [delegation] *and the GMs want it because they have the capacity and resources to deal with it. But to me ... it is a bit like the National Health Service: I want to pay my stamp each week and call on it when I need to.*'

Others, who had also opted to buy back from the LEA, may also have felt insecure about approaching the wider market for core services. One primary

head, for example, described how she had received some misguided advice from the LEA's personnel service, which had resulted in legal action, yet had chosen to continue buying this service. The justification was:

> *'I suppose you stick with what you know. It is quite a leap in the dark to go elsewhere and not one I would feel confident about.'*

Elsewhere, another interviewee, who had continued to buy back LEA services despite some reservations, added:

> *'At least we know what we are buying. Better the devil you know!'*

Economies of scale

Larger schools recognised the benefit of having monies delegated. It offered them the opportunity to weigh up the available options and assisted the process of financial planning, but for smaller schools, the amount of funding actually realised, when central services became trading organisations, often fell short of expectations. In some cases, the amount delegated was clearly insufficient for purchasing a similar level of provision from external companies. This was one reason why primary heads and governors believed that Fair Funding was irrelevant to their situation. It was perceived as a model that suited large secondary schools.

> '*The amount of money you get by not buying in is neither here nor there!*' (primary governor).

> '*I don't want a tiny trickle of money that I have to put aside for a rainy day*' (primary headteacher).

LEA interviewees noted that it need only take a small number of schools to opt out of an LEA service for viability to become an issue. There was genuine concern about the effect that this might have on some schools that were in a less advantageous position. Some interviewees believed this could lead to tension and division between schools and undermine the vision of partnership.

Loyalty to the LEA

Schools were well aware of the vulnerability of LEA services under the new funding arrangements and there was evidence to suggest that some schools had decided to buy back LEA services in the first year, largely as an act of faith. However, as already discussed, LEAs realised that their services were being bought on a trial basis and there was no guarantee that the pattern of take-up would be maintained in subsequent years.

> '*We buy back most of our services from the LEA. Whether that will stay the same remains to be seen but I have a great loyalty to the LEA*' (secondary headteacher).

Consultation

As already mentioned above, the speed of the consultation period and the subsequent implementation of the new funding mechanism had concerned

some LEA officers. This issue was also mentioned by headteachers and governors, who felt that their short-term options had been limited, due to the tightness of the timescale.

> '*We felt as though we had been thrust into this unprepared, untrained and unaware of what the additional resource implications were going to be for managing the school. I think the LEA was equally ignorant, so in a way you can't blame them but that is the fact of the matter*' (special school headteacher).

This suggests that some heads had bought back LEA services for the (then) current year because it was easier, as there had not been enough time to look around. There were indications that, at the time of the research, headteachers were already beginning to weigh up the options now that more information was becoming available. Interviewees in a number of LEAs felt that, initially, they had not been given sufficient information by their LEA, in terms of the options available.

In three of the LEAs, there was a feeling amongst secondary headteachers that the views of the primary schools had taken precedence in the LEA's consultation exercise. Their interpretation was that the results had been presented as a numerical whole, rather than analysed according to phase, and since there were many more primary schools, this method of analysis failed to reflect the collective views of secondary schools.

There were some aspects of finance that schools wanted LEAs to retain responsibility for. Overall, the services that were mentioned most frequently by heads and governors were:

- finance
- personnel
- insurance
- legal services
- structural maintenance
- school meals (in smaller primary schools).

2.4 Education Development Plans

The statutory requirement for LEAs to prepare and publish an Education Development Plan (EDP) became fully operational in April 1999. For the first time, LEAs were required to set out (after consultation with key partners) their priorities for raising standards, and provide a costed description of all centrally managed activities. EDPs must also provide details of targets set with schools and demonstrate how these dovetail with LEA and national targets. This aspect is discussed in the following section on target setting (**2.5**).

Draft versions of the EDP were submitted to the Secretary of State for approval at the end of 1998. It was proposed that EDPs would enable the Government to assess and monitor each LEA's performance and provide a direct mechanism for public accountability. Guidance made it clear that if LEAs failed to make sufficient progress against their targets, the Secretary of State would take action to stimulate improvement.

Phase 2 of the NFER research, which focused on interviews with LEA representatives, was conducted just after this period of activity. Directors of Education and senior officers in each of the ten LEAs were asked by researchers to consider the challenges and opportunities afforded by introduction of EDPs, as a means of setting out their intentions to promote school improvement within the local, as well as national, context. In Phase 3, views of headteachers and governors were collected. Interviews from both phases of the research programme were analysed together with the Education Development Plans from each LEA. The main findings are detailed below.

National and local priorities

LEAs were advised by the Standards and Effectiveness Unit (SEU) to focus on a manageable number of priorities (between five and eight) which were designed to raise pupils' standards of achievement, improve the quality of teaching and improve the quality of leadership and management. Further prescription required LEAs to have regard for the Government's priorities of improving standards of literacy and numeracy, raising standards among underachieving groups and supporting schools causing concern. Not surprisingly, the outcome was a fairly standard set of EDP priorities nationally (Arnold, 1999) and this was also reflected in the ten LEAs in the present study. Although there were examples of particular local priorities (for example, greater partnership with community or a focus on specific curriculum areas, other than those identified by the Government), there was a general view that the process had been driven from the Department. For example:

> '*It* [the EDP] *gave us a sense of purpose and certainly it gave us a clearer focus. However, it sets a central agenda which is not completely ours. And I am fairly disappointed that, as a new council, we were having to operate under someone else's agenda. The thing is, we always try to work flexibly with schools – not be over-directive – give them ownership and there is a definite mismatch between the way the DfEE works with councils and the way it expects councils to work with schools!*
>
> *The DfEE is tarring all councils with the same brush. That's the reality*' (Director of Education).

The level of prescription that was imposed upon LEAs in the drawing up of their EDPs was clearly a source of tension for officers. One interviewee described how the LEA had wanted to include an objective about working

on the expectations and aspirations of young people and was told by the regional adviser that this would be inappropriate because it was '*too general*' and lacked specific outcomes.

> *'In the end it was OK but we had to argue our case and we could only have done that by having a good relationship with our DfEE adviser.'*

Another LEA had stated the priority of providing '*a rich and diverse*' curriculum and had gained the support of schools in the inclusion of this aspect. When subsequent discussions were held with the DfEE's regional adviser, the LEA was able to say: '*Look, the majority of our schools say they would like us to preserve things like environmental education. They don't want us to throw the baby out with the bath water!*'

Elsewhere, another Director described how original intentions had been modified and tapered to meet Government requirements:

> *'Along with everyone else, we went through a number of stages. I remember the initial stage – saying "Right, this EDP will be really broadly based – we'll show them the extent of all this!" That was just being a bit bullish really. In reality, what happened was people then succumbed and actually it is predominantly about our advice and inspection service. We knew we would get named and shamed if we got it all wrong so might as well get on with it. We became reluctantly pragmatic about it. Here was the script – being defined for us in rather precise terms whether we like it or not. An unhealthy but none the less realistic perception that people have about it'* (Director of Education).

Most of the Directors conceded that the process of developing their EDP had been useful in terms of reinforcing the school improvement agenda and, in some cases, had acted as a lever for implementing necessary changes. The exercise had focused and sharpened the level of planning and helped to identify needs. Main issues related to:

- the level of prescription imposed by the DfEE
- inconsistent guidance and mixed messages about what could and could not be included
- the restricted timescale for implementation
- a perceived lack of cohesion between the EDP and other strategic LEA plans
- a failure by some schools to recognise the significance/relevance of the EDP
- apparent oversight of the fact that not all LEA activity for school improvement was easily quantifiable, or indeed made public.

The latter point is particularly noteworthy here, as this issue emerged as a constant theme throughout the study and is referred to elsewhere in the

report. Certain aspects of the LEA's support and challenge role apparently remain largely 'invisible' due to the sensitivity of the work. As one Director explained, this low-key element of the LEA's role is not easy to quantify but is absolutely fundamental to school improvement:

> *'The amount of time we spend trying to stitch back relations between heads and deputies, heads and staff, heads and governors ... and so it goes on! Some of it is public and some isn't but, in a sense, it is all "unseen" because it isn't quantifiable. We are always supportive of our schools in public, never ever critical. But we pay the price because others don't know what is going on behind closed doors and nor should they. So there is an awful lot of preventative work, which I think, without us, would result in catastrophic events.'*

2.5 Target setting

Governing bodies are legally required to set and publish targets for pupil performance at the ages of 11 and 16, in relation to National Curriculum assessments and public examinations. Although the responsibility for target setting rests firmly with schools themselves, LEAs are required to provide a range of benchmarking data and to advise and challenge schools in setting their targets. The school targets must be included in the annexes of LEAs' EDPs, whether or not these are met. Most importantly, school targets are expected to support progress towards meeting the national targets set (by the Secretary of State) for the year 2002. As part of this overall objective, 'top-down' targets for LEAs were drawn up in consultation with the DfEE.

Some interviewees described how this 'top-down' approach had triggered a hostile reaction from some schools when the key stage 2 literacy targets were first announced and advisers sometimes found themselves defending central policy and 'consoling schools' at the same time.

For secondary schools, most LEAs set indicative targets which advisers then used to negotiate with headteachers and governors. This exercise was described as a '*delicate art*'. Schools were generally encouraged to use their knowledge of pupils as the starting point in setting targets in what is known as a 'bottom-up' approach. This was considered to be effective, providing relationships between schools and their LEA were good and advisers had a good, contextual knowledge of the school in question. It was also important that schools understood how the LEA had arrived at indicative targets, to assure headteachers that this had not been an arbitrary decision.

In one LEA, where pupil cohorts were generally small, a decision was made not to set indicative targets. Instead, schools were given the LEA target as a benchmark and used their knowledge about their relative positioning in the league tables to identify appropriate school targets.

In most cases, advisers had the opportunity to discuss the procedures for school and LEA target setting with headteachers as part of their termly monitoring visit. In a minority of LEAs, where advisers had not had this opportunity to talk through the process as part of the school monitoring programme, schools had, for the most part, worked the process out for themselves but later requested more clarification or consistent guidance from the LEA.

One concern for LEAs and schools was that incremental targets might not be met in subsequent years because it was difficult to predict the actual route of progression in terms of pupil attainment.

> '*Fun and games will start next autumn because we have to make an exponential leap in key stage 2 targets*' (senior officer).
>
> '*We are monitoring and holding our breath*' (senior adviser).

Ensuring that targets are challenging

According to the Government, the role of LEAs is not only to advise but, where necessary, to challenge and apply pressure to schools in setting and meeting their targets for raising standards continuously. Draft school targets should be discussed and annual targets agreed in collaboration with each school and, where agreement cannot be reached, LEAs should invoke an early warning system.

Building in an element of challenge was apparently difficult for some schools to actualise. According to some advisers, most schools were able to make predictions about future pupil performance, but found it harder to move away from the 'comfort zone' by adding a component of challenge in assessing potential.

Interviews with other advisers and staff in schools suggested that a more likely explanation was more to do with the perceived risk involved for schools. If targets were too ambitious, they might not be achieved, and this might be interpreted as failure.

> '*The worry is, if you set your sights too high, you will be criticised for not quite getting there*' (deputy headteacher).
>
> '*You have to be brave to set targets you may not hit*' (special school headteacher).
>
> '*The point is to ensure that sensible targets are set – ones which are achievable*' (secondary head of department).

It was anxiety about the publication, scrutiny and interpretation of results, by those who knew less about the context of the school, which invariably influenced schools. As this secondary link adviser explained:

> *'In all my time as an inspector, some of the most difficult discussions I have had with headteachers were about agreeing targets. And it was to do with people's fear of failing. My interpretation is that it was not so much to do with local issues –*

not that they thought I would give them a hard time if they didn't meet the targets. They were worried about it being published in national league tables of schools identified as not having met their targets. In one school, the governors set higher targets [than the LEA]. *That school took the view that you* ***aim*** *for targets and see how close you can get to them. This is the view I try to encourage people to take ... but I don't think I have succeeded. The majority of schools still interpret a target as something you* ***have*** *to meet.'*

The important consideration for LEAs was that, in order to set indicative targets and evaluate whether or not school targets were sufficiently challenging, advisers needed to have a good knowledge of the school context. Without this, the process of negotiation could, as one secondary deputy head observed, deteriorate into a 'horse-trade' scenario, with each party bargaining up and down to reach a compromise.

Equally, schools were expected to produce tangible evidence to support the level of targets they had set. Advisers were willing to listen to explanations but not excuses.

'Headteachers have said, and quite rightly so in my opinion, that they must base their targets on their knowledge of different cohorts of children. If a school has actually demonstrated that it has set targets which reflect an improvement over a key stage, with a value-added element, and has planned strategies to rectify any weaknesses, then what more can a school do?' (senior adviser).

For schools that were already achieving high standards, there was sometimes a tension about the expectation to set ever-higher targets. Advisers described how headteachers in some successful schools felt antagonistic, and retorted that their school was '*already doing its bit for the LEA!*'

Use of the 'Y' code

The principle that LEAs should identify schools that had not set sufficiently challenging targets, by marking them with the letter 'Y' in the EDP was challenged by most LEA interviewees, who perceived that this could undermine their relationships with schools.

Of the ten LEAs in this study, one reported that the Y code had been used. A small number of interviewees claimed that all school targets were acceptably close to the LEA target. Elsewhere, the joint revisiting of targets had usually resulted in revised and more acceptable figures and in some cases, the LEA had offered additional support to help target pupils who were most at risk and underperforming. However, there were other cases where LEAs had to accept, after further deliberation and scrutiny at pupil level, that the original school targets were, in fact, sufficiently challenging.

'A number of schools did set targets below our indicative targets, but in all fairness we had to put our hands on our heart and say: "Yes – for that particular cohort, this is a challenging target." So, that is what we have actually done' (senior adviser).

This invariably brought the LEA into conflict with DfEE expectations but officers refused to be overruled. As one Director recounted:

'The DfEE's response was "Put a Y and tell these schools they are underperforming". I said we wouldn't do that. We had set up a process that was professional and rigorous. But they put a fair bit of pressure on us.'

Involvement of governors

The general view was that governors had a limited role in target setting. Even though governors had been offered training opportunities, some were not taking full advantage of it. By and large, governor involvement was more likely to be one of confirming or 'rubber-stamping' the targets set by the senior management team. In one case, governors were deliberately not invited by the LEA to attend the first target-setting meeting with the headteacher. The reason that was given to the researcher was that officers felt it would be unfair to challenge headteachers in the presence of the Chair of Governors.

Issues for special schools and small schools

Staff and governors in all five special schools that were visited referred to difficulties they faced in responding to the national target-setting requirements. The key issues were that national benchmarks were not relevant and some pupils in special schools, by the very nature of their condition, did not necessarily make a steady rate of progress throughout their school career. This was particularly significant in schools for pupils with severe and profound and multiple learning difficulties and supports findings from other recent research (Male, 2000). While some pupils made bursts of progress in the early years before reaching a plateau, others, with regressive conditions, showed a decline in their rate of achievement. The prevalent view amongst special school headteachers was that there had been inadequate deliberation by the DfEE in respect of statutory target setting for this section of the school population and this led to frustration:

'Nationally linked targets are not meaningful. We always have to submit a series of noughts!'

Other recent research also found that the national focus on 'raw' examination scores was perceived by LEA support staff as militating against pupils with special educational needs (Fletcher-Campbell and Cullen, 1999).

One headteacher in a school for pupils with severe learning difficulties had looked in depth at a number of different models, but had found none to be appropriate for the pupils in that school. The descriptions of attainment leading to level 1 of the National Curriculum, widely known as 'p' scales, were useful up to a point but additional layers had been added by the school; otherwise '*some of our pupils would never reach a target in the whole of their school life!*'

A number of interviewees also made a similar reference to small schools, where initially it had been an issue for advisers to persuade headteachers of

the relevance of target setting. In two of the LEAs, where there was a high proportion of small, rural schools, the problem was particularly significant:

> '*Heads do worry. They phone me up and say "Look, your profile shows that our girls are doing appallingly at maths but we only have three girls and two boys so you are talking about one person here!*"' (information officer).

Added to this, headteachers of small schools often had a high teaching commitment that allowed little time for the extra administration required. However, advisers were under the impression that initial hostility was gradually being overcome by focusing on tracking the progress of individual pupils, although this did require a longer timescale to be worthwhile. Several of the LEAs were developing special arrangements such as clustering the results from groups of small schools.

2.6 Inclusion

A further area of potential tension that might impact on the relationship between the LEA and schools was identified in relation to the Government's drive for social inclusion. This development was perceived by some mainstream school interviewees to be at odds with the league table agenda (see also Gray and Panter, 2000). For example, schools that were under-subscribed found themselves under pressure to accept more pupils with challenging behaviour and this tension was described by one secondary school teacher as the '*single biggest problem we face*'. The perception here was that the move towards greater inclusion, aligned with the duress of meeting challenging school improvement targets, had significantly increased stress levels and lowered staff morale. Inevitably, it was the LEA that acted as a buffer and bore the brunt of this frustration. Circular 11/99 states that LEAs should encourage schools to cooperate to '*spread the burden of re-integrating excluded pupils in the area*' (GB. DfEE, 1999). This is unlikely to be a straightforward matter as many schools do not have the capacity to accept additional pupils on to the roll. For those schools that do have surplus places, pressure to admit additional pupils with a history of challenging behaviour may exacerbate the situation and damage relationships. In this way, school dissatisfaction about aspects of central policy could be manifested in terms of the perceived effectiveness of the LEA. As one secondary deputy head explained:

> '*This one aspect, affects and lowers the reputation of the LEA in the eyes of staff in this school, even though the Government is no doubt setting inclusion targets for them.*'

A primary headteacher in an inner-city school expressed a similar view:

> *'Inclusion puts huge pressure on schools like this. I think it is all about trying to move too fast. Nearly all headteachers support the principle of inclusion but recognise there are some children that they simply cannot manage. Therefore, somehow we feel less supported by the LEA in that respect.'*

Increased tension brought about by the apparent mismatch between the culture of inclusion and the pressure to achieve targets had influenced the decision of one primary headteacher involved in the NFER study to leave the profession. While this interviewee fully supported the principle of inclusion – '*Everything about it is right*' – she felt that the Government's standards agenda failed to take adequate account of this important dimension.

Furthermore, some headteachers in a minority of LEAs had genuine doubts about their LEA's capacity to implement a policy of inclusion, due to insufficient resources. One headteacher pointed out that recent staffing cuts at the centre had left the LEA largely bereft of its former capacity to take a strong line on strategic decisions. Headteacher and other interest groups in this area had become sufficiently powerful to quash LEA proposals and the interviewee concluded:

> '*I seriously question the LEA's ability to implement this* [the inclusion policy] *in the way the Government expects.*'

2.7 Summary points

- While there was general support for the direction of the steer from central government, LEAs operate within their own unique and local context. A number of variables were identified which might impact upon an LEA's capacity to implement the new LEA role as quickly as the Government expects. These included:
  - the extent to which local education authorities had retained their Advisory and Inspection teams following LMS
  - the ability of new unitary authorities to institute necessary change, yet achieve a seamless transition
  - the impact of disaggregated funding following local government reorganisation
  - a mismatch of expectations (about the LEA role) between the DfEE and local schools
  - the quality of relationships (current and historical) between schools and their LEA.
- By and large, secondary schools welcomed the increased level of delegation afforded by Fair Funding arrangements but primary school headteachers and governors across all phases were less enthusiastic about the prospect. Their chief concerns related to the over-burdening of headteachers. On the positive side, Fair Funding had encouraged LEAs to both analyse critically the quality of their services and enter into a frank dialogue with schools about their perceived needs. The main concerns expressed by LEAs were:
  - the perceived contradiction between Fair Funding and the statutory duty on LEAs to raise standards in schools

- the absence of systematic monitoring and evaluation of external providers
- insufficient in-school management capacity to cope with the additional administrative responsibilities (in some schools)
- the viability of LEA services, upon which some schools depended
- inadequate consultation on the proposals.

♦ There was a general view that schools had been given insufficient time to explore the range of alternative provision and consequently, the majority had bought back LEA services for the first year of implementation. Some schools indicated that they were now beginning to reassess their options, although there were certain services such as personnel, finance, structural maintenance and legal support that schools wanted LEAs to retain.

♦ Most Directors of Education conceded that the process of producing an Education Development Plan had been useful in terms of reinforcing the school improvement agenda. However, the level of prescription relating to identified priorities was a source of tension, as was the perceived tightness of the timescale for implementation and inconsistent guidance about what could or could not be included in the plan. It was noted that not all LEA activities for school improvement were easily quantifiable, or even made public, due to the sensitivities involved. This is referred to here (and elsewhere in the report) as 'low-key' support.

♦ LEA support for target setting in schools was described as a 'delicate art'. To be effective, advisers needed to establish positive working relationships with, and a thorough contextual knowledge about, the schools in their area. Not all advisers were in a position meet these requirements. It was reported that schools generally found it difficult to include an ambitious element of challenge in their targets and suggested that this was linked to a fear of failure. Most of the LEAs did not use the 'Y' code in their EDPs as it was believed that this would undermine relationships with schools. There were particular issues facing some mainstream schools (where small pupil cohorts or a mobile population made target setting problematic) and special schools catering for pupils with more complex learning difficulties. The prevalent view amongst these headteachers was that there had been inadequate deliberation by the DfEE in this respect. Further tension between some schools and their LEAs was brought about by a perceived mismatch between the culture of inclusion and the Government's standards agenda.

3. MONITORING AND CHALLENGING SCHOOLS

This chapter focuses on the ways in which LEAs set out to monitor and challenge all schools in order to help them improve, in the light of the Code of Practice on LEA–School Relations. Direct intervention by LEAs to address serious weaknesses is described later, in Chapter 5. The first section describes the central role of the link adviser, as the principal mediator in the process. The second part of the chapter explores what makes for an effective link adviser and the final section reports upon the ways in which the ten case study LEAs organised and implemented strategies for monitoring their schools.

3.1 The role of the link adviser

Job titles

For the purpose of this report, the term 'link adviser' is used consistently throughout the text in order to protect the anonymity of interviewees who participated in the NFER research. It should be noted, however, that a range of job titles was used in practice to describe the role. Five of the LEAs used the term 'inspector', whereas the other five LEAs used the term 'adviser' as part of the full job title. Staff in schools, however, often used the terminology interchangeably, and this was also noted during interviews with LEA personnel themselves, no doubt owing to recent structural changes and staffing reorganisation. One LEA had deliberately moved from using 'adviser' to 'inspector' in response to the new, sharper focus of the prescribed role, whereas another LEA, which had lost contact with many of its schools over recent years, had done the reverse to emphasise the new support role it was now offering.

The term 'link' was not commonly used in the formal titles (as presented in EDPs); more often, the terms adviser and inspector were prefixed with 'general', 'primary', 'secondary', 'development' or 'attached'. Despite this, the expression 'link adviser' was commonly used by participants during the course of the interviews.

The scope of the role

Although the link work with schools was often described as the predominant feature of the role, there were often other, fairly major areas of responsibility to be juggled as part of the job description. Each LEA had established a different staffing structure, which, in turn, determined the nature of the link adviser's role and the range of key management duties undertaken. Some of the larger LEAs had area or divisional school improvement officers, who also made visits to schools and acted as facilitators by liaising with

other relevant LEA services. Certain LEA structures had other arms of support available to schools such as separate curriculum advisory teams or special support teams for schools causing concern. As a rule, this gave link advisers more scope to take on what could be described as a developmental or whole-school support role, with an emphasis on school improvement, for example by attending governors' meetings or delivering whole-school INSET. In other LEAs, especially in smaller ones, the link advisers combined this work with other significant LEA-wide responsibilities and therefore had to focus their link work more sharply and concentrate on monitoring standards. In these cases, there tended to be more direct contact between schools and other management services such as personnel and finance divisions. In one so-called 'lean' LEA, the staff in schools had a perception that advisers were far too 'bogged down' in administrative work and bid writing, when they should be helping teachers to improve their professional skills.

Constraints

In three of the LEAs, the new administration had inherited a relatively large number of schools in difficulty and this had limited the proposed link adviser role because there had been a requirement to *'fight fires'* before any true developmental work could be tackled. Some link advisers had significant income targets to meet which inevitably took precedence over other aspects.

There was some evidence to suggest that where advisers combined their school link role with an overall curriculum subject responsibility, there was a danger of the latter dimension being squeezed. This was suggested from the comments made by both the advisers themselves and teachers in schools, who often bemoaned the fact that their subject adviser was less visible in school than had formerly been the case.

On the other hand, where link advisers took on responsibility for a national priority aspect, such as inclusion or the National Literacy Strategy, for example, the amount of contact with link schools tended to be reduced.

Involvement in OFSTED inspections

One very clear pattern that emerged from this study was the conscious decision across advice and inspection services to reduce the amount of OFSTED-contracted work undertaken, although this had formerly been considered an important dimension to the role. Of the ten LEAs, eight had decided to limit their involvement in OFSTED- contracted work to just one inspection a year for each adviser. In the other two LEAs, advisers were involved in six to ten inspections a year but this still represented a considerable reduction. In all LEAs, previous levels of OFSTED activity were no longer considered to be either appropriate (in the light of the new role) or cost-effective (as a means of generating income). The main value was now seen in terms of professional development, raising advisers' awareness of practice outside the LEA and maintaining credibility in the eyes of schools. This move was welcomed enthusiastically by link advisers and headteachers alike.

LEA inspections prior to OFSTED

Another, related finding was that all ten LEAs claimed to have wound down their involvement in schools prior to OFSTED inspections. The clear message in the Code of Practice (section 73a) which states that it is not acceptable for LEAs to be conducting a 'dry-run' for OFSTED inspections seemed to have been duly noted. There was general agreement amongst advisers that since schools were now sufficiently familiar with the inspection process, that previous level of need was no longer apparent. Further, it was envisaged that as LEAs built up an improved evidence base in relation to all schools, there would be less need for last-minute 'health checks'. The reduction of the pre-inspection notice period was a slight concern for those officers, however, who felt that they did not yet know their schools sufficiently well.

The previous pattern of mini-inspections was, therefore, no longer part of the LEA agenda, unless schools particularly wanted them and were willing to buy this service. From the interviews, it transpired that a minority of schools still chose this option.

> '*Some heads still want it because it is easier for an outsider to give critical messages ... but they have got to do it themselves*' (secondary link adviser).

In other schools, a new headteacher or relatively inexperienced governing body might request some input prior to OFSTED. Also, in view of the revised OFSTED framework, some advisers reported the need to prepare staff by raising awareness in schools about the changes. The main reason given for justifying pre-OFSTED involvement, however, was to help boost confidence amongst the staff and governors and raise morale so that schools were able to approach the inspection in a positive way, rather than generate even more anxiety. As one link inspector in a new LEA explained:

> '*Even though there were areas that were blindingly bad* [in one school], *we knew we could not tackle them until after the OFSTED or else we would have staff absences. So we had to bite the bullet and swallow hard and wait until OFSTED was over and then start to tackle the real problems.*'

There was, however, an exception to this rule. In one of the LEAs, a number of staff in a school described how a '*troubleshooting*' team of LEA officers had been sent in prior to the school's inspection. The lead officer's style had subsequently caused friction and upset amongst the staff, who were left feeling bitter and demoralised. This LEA action was described by staff in the school as '*typical crisis management*'. It was a seen as a knee-jerk reaction, which placed too much pressure on the school at the last minute. This general perception was also articulated by staff at other schools in the same LEA.

> '*If the LEA knows that a school has an OFSTED coming up, they do seem to rally round but in many ways, that is just being reactive. It is sort of ... "Let's help you get through it." It is a bit like papering over the cracks to "fool" the inspectors*' (secondary head of department).

One deputy head suggested that since the LEA itself had been inspected, a balance of power had somehow shifted. The line now seemed to be drawn for the LEA by OFSTED and so there was an inclination for advisers to wait and see what OFSTED said (about schools) and then act on the basis of that and, in the mean time, ignore the schools that OFSTED approved. No doubt there were other factors to consider, not least that this was an LEA that had undergone a period of turmoil, financial cuts and several reorganisations. Consequently, some advisers had 50 schools to monitor.

The level of monitoring following an OFSTED inspection was largely dependent on the nature of the outcome. Where serious weaknesses were identified, this would trigger additional time and resources via the Standards Fund (see Chapter 5). Other than that, most LEAs only attended the feedback to governors meeting as part of the standard package. It was not common for advisers to provide routine help with the action plan unless this was bought in through a separate arrangement. Monitoring of the action plan was built into the programme of link adviser visits (see **3.3** below).

Communicating the changes to schools

Because of the changes in emphasis and responsibilities that the new link adviser role brought with it, LEAs felt they needed to communicate this set of expectations clearly to schools and demonstrate how they were interpreting and implementing the new Code of Practice on LEA–School Relations. One LEA had produced and published a booklet which set out its aims and principles in this respect, clarifying the two aspects of the link adviser role so that schools were quite clear which activities were chargeable and why.

Overall, staff and governors in schools were well aware of the explicit and implicit changes that had taken place and acknowledged the role had become sharper and clearer. Furthermore, the majority of headteachers believed this to be an improvement on past arrangements.

The introduction of the Code of Practice on LEA–School Relations, which marked out the parameters of a more clearly defined role, coincided in some cases with local government reorganisation and/or the arrival of a new Director of Education and therefore led to a new match between link advisers and schools. Where this was the case, it could be advantageous, as the new relationship could be implemented on a 'fresh start' basis. On the other hand, some link advisers said they found it easy to establish the new role because they already had a solid relationship with schools.

The allocation of link advisers to schools

In six of the LEAs, link advisers had a generalist role and worked across the phases, whereas in the other four, attachments to schools were wholly or mainly phase-related. There was a mixed response from headteachers when they were asked to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of these approaches. On the whole, it was only if heads became dissatisfied that they began to question an adviser's credentials. One secondary

headteacher admitted that colleagues in his phase could be '*very sniffy*' about who came in to advise them and that there was a tendency to question whether or not someone without secondary experience really understood the issues.

> *'I wouldn't get too het up, but then it would depend on what we were talking about. If we were discussing school organisation, then it would help if they understood the type of organisation, but if we were discussing teaching and learning then as long as that person has some expertise, I don't mind whether they come from primary or secondary.'*

On balance, this secondary headteacher believed that there was some value to be gained from cross-phase support. Another secondary head, in an LEA where advisers also worked across phases, thought that it was probably better to have someone with a primary background monitoring in secondary schools than the other way round. If, however, advisers were simply asking first-order questions and completing a tick sheet (as this head described current LEA practice), then the issue was barely significant. However, some link advisers did imply that they felt more pressure when engaging in dialogue with secondary headteachers – '*If they* [secondary heads] *don't think you are talking sense, they let you know and can be very sharp with us!*'

Perhaps this explained why some LEAs, while maintaining a cross-phase approach, had identified experienced and highly regarded advisers with secondary backgrounds to take on more secondary schools within their allocation than some of their colleagues. In one small LEA, there was one link adviser allocated to the 15 secondary schools. Her work was described as '*first-rate*' by the headteacher of one of these schools ('*and I know that I speak for all 14 other heads*') and although the burden on this adviser was acknowledged to be great, there was a '*huge resistance*' from the headteachers to any proposed reallocation because none wanted to lose her support. In another LEA, it was observed that as link advisers gained experience, the prospect of monitoring improvement in secondary schools became less of an issue.

Headteachers in special schools were fairly ambivalent about the phase background of their link advisers. As one head pointed out, even if an LEA had a specialist SEN adviser to link with its special schools, that person would be unlikely to have a background in or experience of all types of special provision. Another acknowledged that some of the most critical and helpful link advisers in his/her experience had come from a secondary background and had no particular expertise in special education. It was the quality of the dialogue and questions that was more important. Interestingly, other staff in special schools (who were not directly involved in the monitoring visits) were more likely to argue the case for specialist advisers than the headteachers.

The ratio of link advisers to schools

The research found quite a wide range of practice amongst the ten LEAs in terms of the ratio of schools to link advisers. The number of schools that advisers were linked with ranged from six to 45. The findings are illustrated below:

Table 3.1 Average number of schools allocated to link advisers in each of the ten LEAs

Typical number of schools per link adviser	Comments made by officers
6	A good number. Enables coverage of all aspects.
8	Enables a good all-round knowledge
12	Any more becomes too difficult to juggle
15	Just manageable in a large LEA
17	Manageable in a small authority
19	Too many
20	Any more and advisers would not be able to know schools well.
25	Too many. The longer term aim is 15.
40	Just about manageable with additional support but no time for developmental work
45	Advisers monitor in tandem with officers. Limited monitoring role

As discussed earlier, this comparison should be treated with caution as the roles and responsibilities of link advisers in different LEAs were so variable. It does, however, provide some insight into the circumstances under which advisers are operating.

There was a general agreement that three years was probably the optimum length of time that an adviser should be linked to a particular school, to avoid the prospect of over-familiarity and to allow a fresh start. This, though, was not an issue for LEAs at the time of the research. If anything, there had been too many changes of link adviser due to wider influences. It was also found that more senior and experienced link advisers tended to be allocated more schools causing concern or those which posed a potential challenge in other ways, such as former grant maintained schools. However, as one senior adviser observed, this distribution needed to be weighed up carefully because of the emotional energy required to work with those schools.

Time management and monitoring of the link adviser's work

The most common arrangement or intention was for advisers to complete a weekly log of their time and for this to be monitored periodically by senior colleagues. In a minority of LEAs, other monitoring strategies were being developed or explored. In one, for example, a small number of senior advisers with no link schools were planning to work alongside link advisers to monitor effectiveness, generate more consistency and provide a support role. As part of Best Value, schools would be encouraged to evaluate the impact of link work at the end of the year. In another area, the LEA had set up a working group to monitor whether schools found the link adviser's input worthwhile. Elsewhere, an OFSTED inspection had identified a wide variation in the impact of adviser work. A senior officer here admitted that perhaps there were some people who felt closer to a particular school and perhaps empathised almost too much with the head, whereas other people were very ready to challenge. By way of response, this LEA was looking at developing and publishing a set of standards for advisers.

3.2 What makes an effective link adviser?

Perceptions about the importance of headship experience

Overall, there were mixed views about whether link advisers needed to have headteacher experience in order to be effective in their role. Most LEA officers believed it to be an important prerequisite and sensed that it was something that schools expected from their LEA. Discussions with headteachers, however, did not substantiate this perception. A link adviser's personal qualities and interpersonal skills were, apparently, just as important and it was the experience of OFSTED training and involvement in inspections which were more often cited as the most important credentials.

In all the LEAs in the study, the advice and inspection teams included a high proportion of ex-primary headteachers. Former secondary heads, however, were less likely to feature in the teams (as discussed below).

In one LEA, it was an essential requirement for adviser postholders to have headteacher experience, and it was common practice there to second headteachers for fixed periods. In more than half of the LEAs, officers emphasised that headteacher experience was a very important consideration and the aim was to recruit advisers entirely or predominantly from this sector. As one senior inspector pointed out, there was a need for link advisers to be able to demonstrate both credibility and empathy. This was best achieved by appointing ex-headteachers. The same view was reinforced by a primary link adviser from another LEA:

> *'It is important because you don't appreciate the "grip in the stomach" until you have actually been there! You* [headteachers] *feel you never get it right and you get obsessed with your own failings rather than your successes. You* [link advisers] *have to*

understand that and no theoretical model can compensate for having been through all that ... So I think primary heads would have great difficulty accepting what we do if it wasn't coming from someone who had done the job for themselves.'

In three LEAs, it was suggested that while it was important to have some former headteachers in the team, it was not always the preferred option and there was a need to achieve an appropriate balance. This was because some former headteachers might have a narrow view (based on their own model of working) when it came to evaluating effective school management methods, for example, or perhaps had a limited experience of recent classroom management and curriculum delivery. Officers in one of these LEAs thought that serving deputy heads could present a more attractive option. The other emerging realisation amongst officers and headteachers was that experience as an OFSTED inspector was probably more important to the work of a link adviser than experience of headship. This was perceived to provide an element of quality assurance:

'That is probably more important than anything else.' (primary headteacher).

'Even though it is demanding, the quality of support and advice as a result ... you can't get any other way' (secondary link adviser).

Recruitment issues

In seven of the LEAs, officers described the problem of being unable to recruit secondary headteachers into the advice and inspection service. Of these, three LEAs were also beginning to experience a problem with primary headteacher recruitment. Whereas in the past, such a move into the LEA was seen as a promotion, circumstances had changed and the pay differential was now such that it was no longer viewed as an attractive career move for headteachers. Where LEAs had a middle school system, this was thought to be helpful in recruiting headteachers who could effectively bridge the phase divide. Also, because middle school heads were paid relatively less than their secondary school counterparts, the prospect of moving across to an adviser post did not necessarily constitute a reduction in salary.

The recruitment difficulties were, not surprisingly, compounded for LEAs where link advisers were also required to lead on a specified subject area. The creation of secondment opportunities for serving headteachers was considered to be effective in at least one LEA but even this option did not always provide the solution, as described by one chief inspector below:

'Secondary heads are told there are vacancies in the team but they are unwilling to take a pay cut. Half of the secondary heads are paid more than I am. We have offered them secondment opportunities ... perhaps they don't want to be challenged? The [secondary] *schools are performing well so those heads find any sort of criticism really difficult. So, we are looking for primary specialists because, in the main, the secondary heads are not willing to put their money where their mouth is. They stand on the sideline and complain.'*

Qualities, skills and characteristics

For many staff and governors and for headteachers in particular, the link adviser is essentially the representative 'face' of the LEA. As such, advisers find themselves charged with a quite onerous level of responsibility. It requires a remarkable level of professional skill to fulfil the expectations required of a critical friend, professional adviser, inspector, ally, change agent and bearer of challenging messages – in other words, achieving the optimum balance between support and challenge. There was agreement amongst headteachers and governors that the quality of the link adviser was crucial. One secondary head summed it up this way:

> '*She has the ability to listen and to hear what is not being said. Her perception is shrewd. She very quickly and effectively gets to the key questions, which perhaps are less comfortable but are essential to raise. She is rigorous. If it was handled less than well, it could be perceived as a very threatening and negative experience but, handled well (and it is), it is a very, very challenging and thorough but constructive experience. But, what I can't do (because I have only experience of this one inspector) is separate out how much is down to the process and how much is due to the calibre of the inspector. I suspect it relies very heavily on the person.*'

Effective challenge

Although most link advisers who were interviewed were entirely comfortable with and confident about the new role, there were a few indications that the challenge aspect did not come too easily to them all. One primary deputy head recognised this but felt it would be '*very sad*' if the new role discouraged some '*really special people*' within the LEA who excelled at the support aspects but who were not naturally inspectorial. In a different LEA, a secondary headteacher felt that his link adviser needed to be less supportive and more challenging.

What emerged overall was that the challenge aspect of the role was more acceptable to both headteachers and advisers, and less likely to damage the relationship if it was grounded in a positive working relationship and channelled in an open but non-confrontational manner. Schools could be challenged effectively even when this was handled in a gentle, probing way. Advisers thought it was important to let the schools know they were on the same side and that they were '*rooting*' for them to improve, without giving the impression that the relationship was in any way '*cosy*'. One primary link adviser approached it by suggesting to headteachers that it was better for difficult messages to be delivered by the LEA rather than coming from OFSTED. Provided the messages were evaluative as opposed to critical, were backed up with evidence and followed up effectively, then schools were more likely to be receptive.

> '*The link inspector is very good at playing devil's advocate and that is an important tool. I don't know whether these people have*

specific training in that skill but they are good at it! They are very good at posing questions that we almost take for granted. This asking of challenging questions is a vital contribution. I think, as far as the LEA is concerned, they have got the balance about right. I think we are challenged when we need to be challenged' (chair of governors, primary school).

In three LEAs, where there had been some reorganisation, the support and challenge balance was thought to be still evolving, but even where advisers recognised there was some way yet to go, the driving force which made the challenging aspect easier for advisers to tackle was that of children's entitlement. In only one of the LEAs was there a common perception in schools that the challenge aspect was underdeveloped. This was put down to the fact that the LEA was understaffed and overstretched. According to the headteachers in this LEA, there was no challenge because advisers did not know enough to be able to fulfil this expectation.

Maintaining a balance between support and challenge

When a new Director was appointed in one LEA, headteachers wrote asking for more advice and less inspection. His response was that schools couldn't have one without the other.

One of the main problems for link advisers was that the two-pronged role sometimes generated an element of suspicion or a lack of trust in the eyes of teachers and heads. This was more likely to be the case if an LEA had previously been engaged in a high level of OFSTED-contracted work and had, in a sense, lost touch with its schools. One literacy coordinator described how class teachers sometimes felt they needed to have someone from outside the school to whom they could admit problems without fear of repercussions. A secondary head of department also thought it would be helpful to seek advice from the link adviser but worried about certain messages getting back to the headteacher. This type of concern was echoed by a primary headteacher (in an LEA where levels of contact between schools and LEA had been reduced in recent years): '*If you know that if you open up to someone about problems, they are going to report it, then you are not going to do it.*'

These examples indicate that in order to fulfil the dual aspects of the role effectively, link advisers in some schools need to develop a greater level of trust. This is unlikely to be achieved where opportunities for interpersonal contact are strictly limited. The balance of support and challenge is undoubtedly a precarious one which requires a high level of professional skills, a framework which provides sufficient time for link advisers to really understand the school context and be able to cement positive relationships and a mutual understanding of the expectations. As one link adviser observed, the process of building up trust can only be achieved effectively over a period of time: '*Sometimes heads want to test* [the level of trust] *out with you or discuss some really quite difficult issues and know that you will not include it in your visit notes.*'

Elsewhere, the challenge from both the LEA and from central government was beginning to take its toll on headteachers, staff and governors. One secondary headteacher described how it was important to guard against potentially over-zealous challenging and that this was easier to manage when the relationship was solid.

> '*A couple of times, I have said* [to the link adviser] *"Hold it! This is rather too much challenge than support" and immediately the balance has been redressed. There needs to be a lot of openness and trust to get to that relationship where you can say "I am sorry, but this is just too much – we can't respond to what you are wanting at this point."*'

Two other headteachers had come to the realisation that they did not want to continue working under a regime of constant monitoring and were leaving the profession. Neither school had been identified as having serious weaknesses. One of them predicted there would be '*burnout on a grand scale*' within the profession if the current levels of pressure were maintained. Both of these interviewees were experienced headteachers who felt that the personal and professional support dimension had got lost somewhere along the way.

There is an important message here for LEAs and policy makers. In the constant endeavour to raise standards, it is vital to acknowledge the potential danger of pushing professionals to the limit. As one primary school literacy coordinator explained:

> '*Everything is supposed to show results immediately. We had a very nice letter from the Director after we had the OFSTED and it was a very good report, and it ended saying I look forward to even more improvement and ... it made you feel like "Will it ever end?" You wouldn't expect them to keep telling you are doing a good job but it would be nice to hear something. The way things come down always makes you feel like you are still not doing your best. It would be nicer if LEAs were more supportive than judgmental. I don't want it to come across as if I think we shouldn't be pushed, but maybe if they responded to some of the negatives you hear on the news with a positive slant. Even the schools who are not raising their standards year by year are very often schools who have an intake of students who have a lot of other problems and those schools are doing wonders with them.*'

3.3 Methods of monitoring and challenging

Desk-top monitoring

> '*School visits should not be treated as the LEA's main mechanism for monitoring performance in its schools. That should be done through the analysis of the wide range of information about*

> *standards and other aspects of school performance already available to LEAs. Such analysis should be the primary means of identifying those cases where further investigation is needed...'* (GB. DfEE, 1999a, Section 73b).

Despite such clear messages in the Code of Practice, the NFER research found that senior LEA officers and link advisers were unanimous in their disagreement with the assumption that all schools could be effectively monitored without a programme of regular and focused visits. When asked their views about the Code's guidance in this matter, only two out of 31 senior officers admitted to having mixed feelings or a partial sympathy with the principle. The remaining officers were adamant that school visits were just as important as data analysis in monitoring school performance and improvement and upheld that the approaches should be seen as complementary with equal value. One senior officer described the monitoring process as a '*three-legged stool*':

> '*One leg is based on performance data, outcome-related and adjustable with value added; the second leg is OFSTED data, which can be a spongy base at times and only happens every four or six years; the third leg is some regular contact with schools that enables us to pick up other issues ... to do with school ethos and management, where there may be cause for concern or some early signs of concern.*'

The majority of officers were able to draw upon their own experiences as OFSTED inspectors in distinguishing the need to 'get a view' from the paperwork but then to be able to test out that view in case it had been interpreted wrongly.

LEA interviewees offered a wide range of examples to support and justify the claim that data analysis should not be accepted as the primary mechanism for monitoring school performance. These are summarised below.

- **Data are historical and can be fragmented**

Even though methods of data collection and dissemination are improving, the analysis of data will only show a decline in school performance retrospectively. One Director pointed out, for example, that it may not be until key stage 1 test results are published that weak early years provision is identified as impacting on standards.

While it was recognised that OFSTED reports gave a flavour of the qualitative aspects, inspections were infrequent and this limited their usefulness in monitoring over time. Some officers pointed out that OFSTED reports sometimes failed to identify concerns that were known to the LEA and where inspection teams were small, curriculum issues were not always detected due to a lack of specialist subject expertise.

Although it was acknowledged that supplementary data held by personnel departments may help to track and uncover potential whole-school issues

(a high turnover of staff might, for example, indicate weak management skills), this approach was, in many cases, insufficiently developed to enable officers to pick such issues up from a paper exercise.

- **Data need to be considered in context**

There were a number of references about the need to get '*beneath*' the data in order to understand it fully and make an appropriate response. This was best achieved by combining the data analysis with a programme of visits. In one LEA, where staff shortages had left some secondary schools without a link adviser for several months, a headteacher described how she and other headteacher colleagues had been annoyed to receive a '*cold*' letter from the LEA commenting on recent test results. Their annoyance stemmed from the fact that they had not had the opportunity to contextualise this data first with an adviser.

In another LEA, one adviser described the local situation in which some schools achieved very good results. The consistently high standards were, in her view, protecting those schools and masking the quality of teaching. She happened to know that many of the pupils were being tutored privately outside school time and were achieving well, with strong parental support and in spite of the quality of education being offered.

The need for LEAs to really understand the context of a school was also an important issue in relation to small primary schools, special schools, and schools with highly mobile pupil population. In these types of school, the reliance on performance data as the primary mechanism for monitoring was judged to be even more precarious (as mentioned in the previous chapter, in **2.4**).

- **Data do not describe the quality of relationships**

Several respondents added that not only were school visits essential, it was imperative for advisers to get beyond the headteacher's office and observe what was happening in classrooms and the staff room. Advisers spoke of the need to '*soak up a school's atmosphere*', to talk to pupils, and listen to how they interacted with their teachers and peers. It was perceived that data could not adequately inform advisers about the quality of pastoral care. It was also noted that there may be unhappy or stressed pupils behind a set of high exam results. In terms of assessing the dynamics and morale of the staff, even a shared break in the staff room could be enough to alert the adviser.

- **There is a need for personal contact**

Visits provided link advisers with an opportunity to recognise and share good practice in a range of schools (see also Chapter 5). This was not always possible to achieve in other ways, especially if schools did not have the opportunity, or chose not, to purchase the support of LEA subject advisers. Visits also provided valuable opportunities for discussions, which might highlight personal or professional needs. It was suggested that routine visits could help officers to detect when a headteacher was under pressure, even if this was not immediately obvious.

> '*During a routine visit, a member of staff expressed concern about the head, who was coming into school at weekends and not leaving till ten o' clock at night. Results were good. The LEA couldn't have picked that up from the data. So we put in another headteacher for two days a week to help restore the head's sanity and keep him functional*' (Chief Inspector).

Follow-up interviews with 28 headteachers in a range of schools revealed that almost all valued this element of professional contact to help prevent feelings of isolation arising from their role (see Chapter 4).

It was suggested that experienced advisers would be able to pick up on stressed or under-supported teachers whose performance was suffering as a result, but this was not always possible in some schools where advisers were not offered access to the staff. One adviser explained:

> '*If you could get past the headteacher, there are staff who would welcome the support so you try to get to them in other ways – such as network groups.*'

Another link adviser described how, during the visits, she managed to create opportunities to get beyond the headteacher's office:

> '*You have to be a bit quick on the uptake. So, when a head mentions something, you say "Oh, I think I'd like to have a look at that" or "Would you like me to have a word with him or her?"*'

The programme of LEA visits to monitor the implementation of the Literacy Hour in primary and special schools was cited as a useful means of accessing classrooms and observing teaching and learning in action. Advisers found this to be a useful mechanism for '*getting a feel for the quality of teaching*' and prompting dialogue about school monitoring systems. This opportunity also helped to offset restrictions in the Code of Practice in relation to classroom observation (see Chapter 5).

Visits could also be used to help officers to identify senior managers who might be willing to offer support in other schools which were experiencing difficulties, or perhaps to identify governors who might be willing to help out elsewhere. Above all, regular visits helped to provide schools with an '*LEA face*'. This in itself was thought to be helpful in extending links, building up a partnership and creating a corporate feel. A number of officers (and teachers) remarked that they would be worried about schools becoming too isolated and insular without regular contact with the LEA to provide an overview of the wider picture and to offer support. This was particularly important for schools that were also isolated geographically.

- **Situations in schools can change abruptly**

This observation was made by a number of LEA and school interviewees. As one adviser pointed out: '*It can take a seemingly small incident or occurrence to dislodge a school's progress.*' This was especially pertinent in the case of small schools '*which look very good on paper but which may turn upside down if one or two members of staff were to leave*'. Other

interviewees confirmed this, adding that even temporary periods of staff illness or personal difficulties could impact significantly on the performance of the school. The speed at which such a school might slide downwards was described as '*worrying*'. Even with a programme of regular visiting, issues in schools could go unnoticed. The head of the advice and inspection service in one authority with a large number of small schools said:

> '*We are certain that we know where schools are likely to be giving us cause for concern ... Our concern now is for the five per cent that can change in the space of a term.*'

School monitoring visits

Apart from the requirement for LEAs to arrange annual target-setting meetings with schools in the autumn term, the Code of Practice presents a fairly flexible approach, allowing LEAs to determine what constitutes a reasonable level of contact, but suggests that termly visits are the standard practice in many areas. It would appear, however, that LEAs are receiving mixed messages on this issue (see also Arnold, 1999). In this study, the Director of one LEA admitted to having '*words with the DfEE*' about the frequency of its visits to schools but eventually stuck to the conviction that three visits a year were not excessive for a new administration which needed to know its schools better.

The guideline of making termly visits was followed in almost all case studies in this study. Interestingly, of the four LEAs that had been inspected by OFSTED, two had been criticised for allocating 12 hours a year for monitoring visits. OFSTED reports stated that this was over-generous and not in line with the principle of intervention in indirect proportion to success. This raises new questions about the optimum length of visits as opposed to the number. Interestingly, it appeared that both of these LEAs were standing firmly by their original judgements, changing the emphasis only slightly by confirming that link advisers would use their discretion as to how much of that allocation would actually be spent in schools. In a third case study LEA, there was no mention of, or judgement about, the number or frequency of visits, in the OFSTED report.

Some of the case study LEAs allocated three half-days a term; others were less specific about the actual duration of the three visits. In two LEAs, additional time for curriculum departmental reviews, on the basis of need, was provided over and above the initial allocation. The Director of another LEA, who '*would not be inhibited by the Code of Practice*' had allocated three full or six half-days to schools – a potential 18 hours in total, adding that '*we will use our sense*'. Another LEA planned to reduce the number of visits to its more successful schools and delegate the money saved back to them to help resource their own self-improvement.

Interviews with LEA advisers across the ten LEAs suggested that they were well aware which schools in their patch needed more or less time than others and made those decisions as part of their professional role.

> *'I started on the assumption that I would divide my time fairly equally between the schools, and now I have firmly moved away from that into ... some schools need a very light touch whereas others need more intensive support. And that is not just my personal experience'* (link adviser).

The response from schools appeared to confirm this interpretation, apart from senior managers in one former grant-maintained grammar school who felt that the LEA had not taken the principle of intervention in inverse proportion to success on board in the way they would have liked. There was a view in this particular school that the LEA's agenda was more about trying to establish a degree of control (over the Foundation schools) rather than building on the strengths of those schools.

Apart from this example, there was no other evidence to suggest that advisers were imposing themselves unnecessarily on schools. If anything, staff in schools would not have been adverse to even more time from their adviser. The level of visits was described by a headteacher from one of the LEAs with a 12-hour allocation as little more than a '*cursory look*'.

Purpose and content

The Code of Practice is more explicit about the purpose and content of the visits, however, as it states that LEAs should ensure that visits are suitably structured, planned and focused, with an emphasis on target setting and standards.

At the time of the research, the majority of LEAs in the NFER study were still in the process of planning and implementing a fixed cycle of focused visits to schools. Of these, three LEAs had opted for a combination of standard and negotiated focuses (provided these were seen as priority areas in the EDP), and four other LEAs had no clearly established cycle apart from the target-setting discussion in the autumn term. Two LEAs stated that they had only just started to implement the programme of visits because of recruitment problems and other pressures.

Only three of the LEAs in the study were already operating a planned rolling programme of agreed focused visits. The content of these provided a solid foundation for the supported self-evaluation programme in schools. The way that these termly visits were organised is illustrated in the table below:

Table 3.2 Focus of monitoring cycle in three LEAs

	Autumn term focus	Spring term focus	Summer term focus
LEA A	Attainment and Progress (including target setting)	Leadership and Management	Quality of Teaching
LEA B	Target Setting	Quality of Teaching	Annual Review
LEA C	Standards and Progress (including target setting)	Quality of Education	Leadership and Management

Whether or not a fixed cycle of agendas had been put into place, link advisers and headteachers all acknowledged that the days of the '*cosy chat*' had gone. There was a sharpness and sense of purpose about the new-style visits. Both parties were expected to have done at least some preparatory work on the data before the meeting and in some cases, time was built into the cycle for this purpose. Where this time was not explicitly earmarked for preparation, link advisers admitted that were not always able to fulfil this function effectively.

> '*Although there is an expectation that we are well briefed before visiting schools, in reality that does not happen. Just a glance through the data because there's not the time... It's very hard then to challenge on the basis of sketchy data*' (link adviser).

In most cases, a written report of the visit was provided as this helped to formalise the procedure and to signal that there would be some follow-up. There was little evidence to suggest that chairs of governors attended these meetings as a matter of course, although some confirmed that they attended the meeting which focused on target setting. One secondary headteacher described how a letter from the LEA '*required*' the chair to attend the forthcoming meeting but this was later '*softened*' in a follow-up letter to an '*invitation to attend*'.

Perceptions about the effectiveness of monitoring visits

The value that senior managers in schools placed on the monitoring visits largely depended partly on the quality of their relationship with the LEA (and with their link adviser in particular), and whether or not the process was a developmental one for the school. From the LEA point of view, the success of the visits also rested on the quality of this relationship. Where a good level of trust and respect had been gained, it was felt that headteachers would talk more openly and frankly and might be more receptive to the adviser's ideas.

A number of headteachers suggested that it would be relatively easy to '*bend the truth*' and tell their adviser what they wanted to hear, in the relatively safe knowledge that it would not be challenged too rigorously. As already mentioned, some advisers reported that it could be difficult to get outside the head's office to meet other members of staff and triangulate the headteacher's perceptions. This was often due to time constraints, but in a few cases, advisers felt that certain headteachers used this tactic deliberately. Where link advisers did not have the opportunity, for whatever reason, to get out and meet other staff in the school, this was likely to be reflected in the views that teachers held about LEAs. Some teachers who were interviewed assumed that the LEA made no contribution because they had never seen their link adviser or they felt that the LEA's monitoring and support system was too hierarchical.

> '*They need to come to departmental meetings, maybe sit in the staff room for a cup of tea. They should become a conduit for the exchange of ideas for regular classroom teachers*' (secondary deputy head).

In general, most heads who were interviewed found the visits helpful to some extent, even though they were aware that a handful of resistant headteacher colleagues in other schools claimed to find them irritating or regarded them as an imposition. Headteachers of special schools typically welcomed the LEA contact and personal support of their link adviser, but often felt that the lack of specialist expertise about the nature of the pupils in the school limited the value of the meetings.

The perception in schools was that monitoring visits needed to have a developmental edge. Headteachers wanted to be challenged and supported rather than audited. One secondary headteacher said that his positive experience of the monitoring visits was rather like a professional appraisal interview, where the key questions were provided well in advance, worked through and reflected upon before coming up with the evidence. During the discussion with the adviser, evidence would be probed in detail and judgements were always negotiated. A primary headteacher in the same LEA described it as a '*formal*' procedure and a '*very reflective exercise*' which was very helpful but not always entirely comfortable. Headteachers wanted their adviser to ask them sharp and even intrusive questions as this helped them to identify gaps in their own monitoring and gave them armour to move the school forward – '*The way we change is often by hearing things we don't want to hear.*' Without this aspect, schools compared monitoring visits to audits or inspections and did not particularly value them.

Officers and headteachers were also asked whether they thought the system of focused visits enabled headteachers to seek personal and professional support on matters not strictly related to the agenda that had been set. One senior inspector remarked that this was an issue; his link advisers often asked how they were to manage the conflicting demands when headteachers wanted to talk to them about other things. He recognised the dilemma and understood the potential isolation associated with headship, but concluded that additional time with advisers had to be purchased (under the terms of

the Code of Practice and Fair Funding). Since a large proportion of link advisers had personal experience of the headteacher role, they understood the need for this type of dialogue and wanted to cement good relationships with headteachers but often found themselves juggling conflicting expectations.

> '*Some heads want time for us to just sit and listen while they off-load. They can't talk to their colleagues in the way they can to their link adviser. But sadly, with the time scales available ... But you do make time, to be honest. You shouldn't, but you do.*'

Another adviser admitted that often, as soon as he walked into a school, he could sense that there was going to be some '*off-loading*' by the headteacher before he could '*get down to business*'.

It was interesting to note that in one of the LEAs, the four headteachers who were interviewed all felt that the process of LEA monitoring visits was ineffectual. These headteachers believed that link advisers were paying lip-service and '*going through the motions of completing a tick sheet to say that schools had been monitored because this* [aspect of the LEA's work] *had been identified as a weakness by OFSTED*'. The programme of visits had got behind in its schedule and headteachers felt that when the visits were conducted, they were superficial. There were no written reports following the visit and '*it felt like nothing more than them just covering their backs*' (secondary deputy head).

The headteachers here felt that the LEA was very much operating a crisis management model, because the service had been cut so severely. They would have liked to see more proactivity on the part of the LEA, a greater investment to prevent schools getting into difficulties, but recognised that '*this authority no longer has the capacity or skills to do anything round that*'.

An officer in a different LEA recognised that misjudgements were made occasionally because, historically, the LEA had become distanced from its schools and was only just beginning to rebuild a knowledge base. Because of the staffing structure, it was felt there was insufficient spare capacity to enable preventative work, that is, to invest time at an early stage. In response, this LEA had seconded a small number of headteachers to work intensively with schools in special measures or serious weaknesses and thus release some time for link advisers to become involved in more preventative work in their areas.

The categorisation of schools in relation to performance

As part of the monitoring process, in each of the ten LEAs, a grading or banding system, had been established to identify and categorise schools in relation to their performance. In half of the LEAs, the grading system was designed to cover the entire range of school performance. See the table below:

Table 3.3 LEA grading systems for school performance (which include the entire range of schools)

LEA 1	
Used a scale from **A-E** where:	
A = Special measures	**B** = Serious weaknesses
C = LEA identified concerns	**D** = Watching brief
E = Excellent	
LEA 2	
Used a scale from **1-5** where:	
1 = Special measures	**2** = Serious weaknesses
3 = LEA identified concerns	**4** = Improving but require challenge
5 = Good	
LEA 3	
Used a scale from **1-5** where:	
1 = Light touch	**2** = Medium touch
3 = LEA identified concerns	**4** = Special measures or serious weaknesses
5 = Emergency response	
LEA 4	
Used a **3** band system:	
1 = Light touch	**2** =Medium touch
3 = Intensive support	
LEA 5	
Used a scale from **1-7** where:	
1 = Outstanding	**2** = Very good
3 = Good but challenge is useful	**4** = Sound but requires challenge
5 = Some weaknesses	**6** = Many weaknesses
7 = Special measures or formal warning	

In the remaining five LEAs, only schools causing concern were graded in this way. See below:

Table 3.4 LEA grading systems for schools causing concern

LEA 6			
Used a scale from **1-5** where:			
1 = Initial concern	**2** = Increasing concern	**3** = First intervention level	**4** = Second intervention level
5 = Direct intervention (special measures)			
LEA 7			
Used a **4** band system:			
1 = Special measures	**2** = Serious weaknesses	**3** = LEA/School identified concerns	**4** = Schools with some weaknesses
LEA 8			
Used a **3** band system:			
1 = Special measures	**2** = Serious weaknesses	**3** = Schools under review	
LEA 9			
Used a **4** band system:			
1 = Special measures	**2** = Serious weaknesses	**3** = Schools requiring a formal warning	**4** = Schools requiring additional support
LEA 10			
Used a **4** band system:			
1 = Special measures	**2** = Serious weaknesses	**3** = Schools issued a formal warning	**4** = LEA identified concerns

Criteria used to determine category allocation

LEAs used a range of criteria to determine the classification of their schools (other than those placed in special measures or serious weaknesses by OFSTED). In discussing how such decisions were reached and justified, it emerged that LEAs needed to:

- establish a clear baseline of agreed standards
- ensure that a wide range of LEA personnel was involved in ongoing monitoring and
- know schools well enough to make effective judgements.

A number of officers mentioned the value of being trained OFSTED inspectors themselves when monitoring and evaluating schools. In one of the LEAs, for example, over half the advisers were experienced Registered Inspectors. Interestingly, these advisers were likely to judge their schools more stringently than OFSTED, as the School Effectiveness Officer illustrated below:

> *'Of the 15 schools (that we had in the medium or intensive support category) that were inspected, we felt OFSTED got it right on 12 occasions and were too slack on three. But on no occasion did OFSTED say something that we hadn't picked up ourselves.'*

In addition, just over half the LEAs said that in establishing a system for monitoring school performance and identifying levels of concern, they opted to use the published OFSTED criteria as a basis, often supplemented with additional LEA criteria. Some LEAs published a list of indicators, drawn up in consultation with heads and governors, to help identify levels of concerns across a broader school context. The following indicators were given as examples:

Relationships and morale

- Poor relationships
- Long-term absence of a senior member of staff
- High staff absence or turnover
- Low morale

Quality of teaching and learning

- Ineffective development planning
- Deteriorating test results
- Pattern of failure to meet targets
- Apparent underachievement given the intake of pupils
- Inconsistencies between teacher assessment and test results
- High levels of exclusion

Quality of leadership and management

- Deficit budgets
- Variable quality of information to parents

- Low take-up of training opportunities
- Problems with recruitment
- Complaints from parents
- Ethos and climate
- Quality of parent partnership

It was emphasised that the presence of one or two indicators would not automatically trigger inclusion on the LEA list, but where several indicators were manifested, this would alert the LEA to make further investigations. As one Director explained;

> '*It is like having a panel of lights and if enough lights come on then we start to get interested in that school.*'

Unsurprisingly, some schools were initially anxious in response to the categorisation of school performance. Whilst agreeing with the procedure in principle, there were concerns that some officers might interpret the criteria too rigidly.

> '*They* [schools] *thought we were quite right to be setting something up which was standardised but when they looked down the criteria I think they all saw something too close for comfort and thought they were all going to be on the list! Once we said "Hang on a bit ... we are actually looking for several of these indicators being present and trust us as officers to use this as a guideline", they relaxed*' (School Effectiveness Officer).

The same officer added that relative '*weightings*' had been attached to the various indicators to help officers make appropriate judgements.

One of the smaller LEAs had developed a detailed categorisation grid to identify relative strengths and weaknesses in schools and this was being developed as a tool for school self-evaluation. A primary school headteacher in a different authority, which used a grading system based on the OFSTED Judgement Recording Form as part of the self-evaluation programme, described how her school was deemed to be '*light-touch*' for literacy, '*intensive support*' for numeracy and a '*medium-touch*' overall. Her view was that it was important to have those things that the school did well recognised by the LEA, even though things were not perfect everywhere, as this lifted staff morale.

In four of the LEAs, officers indicated that software packages such as ALERT, Assessment Manager and ARK had been purchased to improve the sophistication of the monitoring process. They were at various stages of introducing these into schools, with accompanying training programmes for headteachers. Another LEA was intending to prioritise specialist training and support for governors to help them monitor more effectively.

In order to gain a wide perspective about school performance, it was considered essential for LEAs to involve a range of staff in the overall monitoring process. Even though it was likely to be the link adviser who identified concerns initially, it was important to assemble knowledge from

a wide variety of sources. Although there was some evidence that this was beginning to take place, the systematic pooling of information was more likely to be expressed as an aim or aspiration. There was a consensus of opinion, however, that it would be valuable to collate and analyse data on such aspects as staff absence, length of service, mobility of pupils and governor turnover, in order to provide a more cohesive picture or perhaps to unearth and explain particular issues. As one special school head pointed out:

> '*There are so many areas that need monitoring. Does the answer lie with central government to ensure that LEAs have sufficient resources to actually do that part of their role effectively?*'

Although officers considered it important to acquire a thorough and rounded knowledge of schools as part of the LEA monitoring process, this was not always possible to achieve. As mentioned previously, a great deal appeared to depend on the willingness and openness of the headteacher in sharing important information about their schools.

Informing schools about LEA categories

Here there was some variation between LEAs. Although the existence of monitoring groups and their subsequent meetings were common knowledge (and described in the Education Development Plan), the extent to which schools were told about their own grading or category depended partly on the complexity of the system in use and partly on the willingness of the LEA to disclose such matters. Where LEAs used only three or four bands of concern, schools would be likely to know where they were placed anyway, either because of their OFSTED report or because they were in receipt of a formal warning notice or additional resources. The LEA that used three bands indicating light, medium and intensive support wrote to each school every term to communicate the banding details and discussions in schools confirmed that this system was transparent.

Officers in some other LEAs were less sure – '*I think they know*' – or claimed only to '*strive*' to share the information. In a minority of LEAs, there was an implicit assumption that because of the sensitivities involved, schools need not know the full details:

> '*If we identify a school as such, they know it will be treated as a confidential identification but we haven't got to the stage yet where we have said to every single school "This is your category." But if we have concerns about a school, they will know it and will know they are being supported*' (Chief Inspector).

> '*Schools will know if we are concerned about them but they won't have had a letter saying they are on that list*' (School Effectiveness Officer).

Methods of review

Each LEA had established a cycle of reviewing the schools identified as being a cause for concern. Regular meetings, typically involving a School Monitoring Group (or a group with a similar title) were held to monitor recent OFSTED reports, agree upon strategies for support and intervention and to flag up any new concerns. The primary function of the group was to discuss the progress of particular schools causing concern and to track their rate of improvement. In one LEA, the monitoring group would review each school on the register of concern, marking them with a plus sign to denote signs of improvement and a minus to indicate lack of progress. Having identified a school as having weaknesses, it was important to prevent it from slipping further. In another LEA, a School Improvement File was opened on any school requiring additional resources. This file would hold a systematic log of all activities undertaken by LEA staff and was monitored by a senior inspector to ensure that such action was effective. In the case of a third LEA, every school on the concern list was monitored personally by an Assistant Director.

The monitoring groups comprised a collection of senior officers and elected members who met anything from fortnightly to quarterly, although most met on a monthly basis.

School self-evaluation

All LEA officers that were interviewed as part of this study supported the principle of school self-evaluation and held the pragmatic view that this approach signalled the way ahead even though it had implications for their future role. Headteachers were also of the opinion that schools should be taking increasing responsibility for their own monitoring and evaluation, provided there was some means of validating their judgements using a trusted external source.

Two newer authorities had taken the initiative to develop a school self-evaluation programme from the outset. Local government reorganisation had enabled these authorities to establish their school improvement agenda, clarify the respective responsibilities and synchronise the monitoring elements so that LEA visits were designed to be part of the supported self-evaluation programme.

The Directors of three LEAs, felt that the Business Excellence Model had much to offer schools in the systematic use of self-evaluation and this package had been adapted for use in schools by the Lloyds TSB Group. These LEAs were investigating ways in which the Business Excellence Model could used in conjunction with the OFSTED framework to help their schools self-evaluate. There was a feeling that since schools already tended to use the OFSTED judgement recording form as a ready reference tool, it was sensible to incorporate this. In the meantime, training was

being offered to headteachers and some schools were piloting the scheme. Two other LEAs were developing the Joseph Rowntree Foundation approach as a means of building up an evidence base.

The other LEAs also encouraged schools to be self-evaluating but, at the time of the research, had held back on initiating or promoting a model because they were waiting to see whether instruments would come out from central government (OFSTED has since accredited its own school self-evaluation course based on the Oftsed framework). These LEAs were aware, however, that others were ahead in the game.

For effective school self-evaluation, LEAs felt they needed to provide both training and ongoing support, to develop the necessary skills in schools. Some LEAs had recently earned accredited trainer status while another LEA offered a generous in-service package to schools, including supply cover funding, to enable action research, but the future of this was perceived as vulnerable due to Fair Funding arrangements.
Ongoing support was also important to enable schools to triangulate their judgements, to encourage, support and challenge and to '*keep a finger on the pulse*'.

3.4 Summary points

- All LEAs in the study had significantly reduced the amount of OFSTED-related work undertaken, in order to focus more sharply on their own school improvement plan. There was considerable variation in the range of titles used to describe, and the remit of, the link adviser role. The number of schools to which link advisers were allocated ranged from six to 45. In just over half the LEAs, link advisers worked across phases. This was partly because LEAs found it more difficult to recruit secondary phase advisers. LEA officers thought it was important to appoint advisers with headship experience but the pay differential was the greatest obstacle as far as the recruitment of secondary heads was concerned. Interestingly, headteachers themselves did not generally share the view that headship experience was significant. When asked what made an effective link adviser, they believed that OFSTED training (and experience) and certain personal and professional qualities were more important credentials than headship experience.

- Link advisers said they had no problem in balancing the support and challenge equation. Some school interviewees, however, were cautious about the extent to which they were prepared to discuss their difficulties with advisers, in case the issues raised were later used to make judgements about their performance. This suggests the need to develop a more trusting relationship, which is unlikely to be achieved without opportunities for regular contact. There was evidence to suggest that the constant endeavour to raise standards

was taking its toll in some schools. One headteacher predicted that the current regime of monitoring and challenge would result in professional 'burnout' on a grand scale.

- LEA officers agreed that effective monitoring of all schools could not be achieved solely through desk-top analysis. Although data analysis was an important component of the monitoring process, this needed to be supplemented by a regular cycle of focused visits. LEAs were resisting Government pressure to leave successful schools to their own devices as there were many variables which could not be identified by data analysis alone. Headteachers found the visits helpful providing there was a good level of mutual trust and respect between them and their link adviser and there was a developmental edge to the visit. Headteachers wanted to be challenged and supported rather than audited.

- All LEAs in the sample had established a system for categorising and reviewing schools in terms of their relative performance and the amount of LEA support required to help them improve. The principle of supported school-self evaluation (SSE) was considered, by officers, to signal the way ahead, even though this approach had implications for their future role. A small number of LEAs had set up a comprehensive programme of SSE, linked to the LEA monitoring visits, while others were assessing different models or awaiting further guidance from central government.

4. LEA SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

This chapter is concerned with the wide range of support that LEAs provide in order to help schools improve. Focused support for schools causing concern is described in the following chapter. In the context of national policy, LEAs are required to offer educational services to schools (which choose to use them), as well as to provide performance data and focused support to schools on national priorities such as literacy and to help to spread best practice. The following sections examine how LEAs in the present study have responded to these requirements. A more detailed overview of the perceptions held by schools (in relation to LEA support) is provided in Chapter 6.

4.1 Curriculum support

Of the ten LEAs that were included in this research, six were committed to providing support which covered the breadth of the curriculum, whereas the other four LEAs concentrated their efforts largely or exclusively on support for the core subjects. All LEAs in the latter group were newly established and had deliberately set out to offer a supplementary broker service or to work in collaboration with neighbouring LEAs which operated a trading model. The six LEAs which offered the full range of coverage tended to be larger and more established authorities with a history of providing support across the curriculum.

Interviews with headteachers and subject coordinators revealed a lingering expectation that LEAs ought to be offering a range of support across the full curriculum. In smaller LEAs, where policy makers had made a decision from the outset that it would not be viable to attempt full coverage, school staff described this as disappointing or felt that they did not have adequate curriculum support because the authority was too small. One secondary school head of department complained that teachers should not have to go beyond their LEA for training in fundamental issues such as statutory changes to the curriculum.

Where LEAs had been separated off from larger authorities as part of local government reorganisation, but schools were still able to make use of the neighbouring LEA's services, teachers seemed to be less critical of the arrangements. Schools in one of these unitary authorities, however, had, as part of the Fair Funding consultation, opted to have a limited curriculum service from their own LEA rather than buy from a comprehensive service 'next door'.

The more comprehensive range of provision in the other LEAs was not necessarily highly regarded by staff in those schools either, unless there was a genuine commitment by the LEA to treat curriculum development as a priority. In one LEA for example, because advisers had previously been involved predominantly in OFSTED inspections outside the authority, schools had apparently lost patience with the advisory team and had built up relationships with alternative providers, even though the LEA offered a wide range of courses. In some other large LEAs, there were issues related to accessing the training on offer. Even if the LEA did provide a good range of curriculum support, teachers were not necessarily prepared to travel 20 or 30 miles to attend courses.

Main issues

Overall, LEAs appear to be placed in a difficult situation because of conflicting expectations around this aspect of their role. LEAs that considered it pragmatic to concentrate their professional development programme on strategic EDP priorities rather than operating a trading model could be criticised by schools for offering a fragmented service and for failing to deliver and to meet their wider curriculum needs.

On the other hand, those LEAs which relied on meeting earning targets to maintain a comprehensive range of curriculum support needed to be responsive to school demands in order to remain financially secure. If courses had to be cancelled because they were not considered viable, this could trigger a downward spiral of customer dissatisfaction and effectively jeopardise the future of the service.

Pressures on school INSET budgets meant that schools generally preferred a school-based model of curriculum support, as this was a more cost-effective approach. Teachers wanted subject advisers to be more visible and accessible. Heads of department wanted subject advisers to work developmentally as well as responsively, for example by facilitating and organising networking opportunities.

This model of provision however requires a sizeable staffing structure and does not fit easily with the 'leaner' approach that the Government advocates. In addition, there were obvious tensions (amongst heads of department) related to the fact that schools had to buy curriculum support from their LEA even though this was perceived as being inextricably linked to the school improvement agenda. Although LEAs had made a point of distinguishing between core work (which was not charged for) and optional support services, this distinction had not always filtered down to teachers in the classroom and was therefore a source of some confusion and irritation.

> *'It would be nice to be able to talk without the sound of the cash register ringing and dominating the thinking.'*
>
> *'The fact that we have to pay really grates!'*

This issue was even more pertinent in the case of small primary and special schools, without the full range of subject specialists on the staff, as described by one interviewee below:

> '*We were struggling to deliver music with the staff we had and one of our supply teachers agreed to take it on, although she is not a trained musician. She was just trying to keep things going to make sure we addressed the action plan. She rang up an adviser and spent a couple of hours looking at resources. Then I get a bill! We are an LEA school with a curriculum delivery problem but it has just cost me £150 to keep this one curriculum area ticking over! It doesn't feel right. That isn't support!*'

However, whichever model LEAs adopted, there was no guarantee that teachers in schools would access the provision that was available. As one officer pointed out, even before the days of LMS, it was often the schools that needed the training opportunities the most that chose not to take up the option.

A number of officers and teachers mentioned that they were concerned about schools becoming too inward-looking. There was a danger that some schools would become convinced that all the expertise they needed was already within school. Furthermore, if headteachers remained aloof, there could be a gatekeeping effect, which limited the amount of LEA contact that subject and class teachers were able to access via courses. This raises an issue about the level of encouragement (or even intervention) that LEAs can reasonably expect to exert. One LEA was thinking in terms of a minimum level of training in which schools would be expected to participate as part of their commitment to improve, but the officer who suggested this was acutely aware that this approach might be interpreted as unnecessary interference.

Curriculum advisers

In seven of the LEAs, there were at least some individuals (in addition to literacy and numeracy consultants) whose professional role was concerned exclusively with the delivery of curriculum support to schools. These were typically referred to as curriculum advisers, inspectors, leaders or consultants.

In a minority of cases, advisory teachers were employed to support ongoing professional development in the curriculum. Furthermore, where this model had been but was no longer a feature of LEA provision, a number of teachers spoke in nostalgic terms saying that they regretted the loss of the former advisory teacher service.

> '*They were worth their weight in gold. We hung on to their every word... such was their credibility. But they were cut.*'

> '*The advisory teachers that we had three or four years ago were invaluable. They could come in and work alongside the teachers.*'

In one LEA, a full advisory teacher service had survived both LMS and the introduction of Fair Funding, because it was something that schools valued and wanted to support. Originally, this had been an entitlement for all schools but it had since been reorganised on a buy-back arrangement. The LEA had a system whereby approximately 20 teachers, at any one time, were seconded from their position in schools to join the advisory service for up to two years. This ensured a constant flow of staff from schools and gave the LEA increased flexibility when seeking to meet local and national priorities. Their brief was to work alongside teachers, give demonstration lessons, produce support materials and deliver in-service training. Heads and governors supported the arrangement as they perceived it to be a highly effective vehicle for professional development (for the teachers who were seconded) as well as an asset to schools in general, because the advisory teachers were practitioners with a more realistic expectation of what teachers wanted in the way of support.

In three of the LEAs, there was no discrete team of curriculum advisers. Instead, support for the curriculum was organised as part of a wider adviser role, which included link work with a group of schools (see **3.1**). Teachers in these LEAs suggested that subject advisers were '*over-stretched*' and were consequently unable to provide the required level of support.

Centrally organised courses

All of the LEAs in the study offered their schools a centrally organised programme of courses that were largely based on the priorities described in the Education Development Plan. In general, larger LEAs offered a more extensive programme of courses across all curriculum areas, whilst others focused exclusively on the priorities that had been identified in the EDP. Some small LEAs were able to extend this range of courses by using and naming external consultants in their course prospectus. However, in a number of LEAs, school interviewees perceived there to be a contraction of professional development opportunities. One primary school teacher outlined how an OFSTED inspection had identified the need for her to access training in science. Although she was willing to follow this advice, she had been waiting for two years for a suitable LEA course. Eventually, she sought help from other schools.

In another primary school, the headteacher was disappointed that there were fewer opportunities for teachers to access a wide range of LEA courses and concluded that: '*The LEA is having to offer what the Government is directing them to offer.*'

A very common objection voiced by staff in special schools was that LEA courses often lacked relevance and that providers were, too often, inappropriately qualified or experienced.

> '*The number of times you go on a course with an adviser or inspector and they say "Of course, I have no experience of special education but you could try this and the other"*' (special school head).

This factor often discouraged special school teachers from signing up for courses or service level agreements, even though alternative options were very limited.

> '*Sometimes the level of [LEA] advice you get is really quite insulting. But to buy in from outside ... real quality deliverers ... you are talking several hundred pounds a day!*' (special school teacher).

If the expertise was not forthcoming, the next best option, according to these teachers, was LEA support to enable them to be released from the classroom in order to learn from one another and from colleagues in other special schools. In one of the LEAs, a separate special school subject coordinator's network had been established by advisers.

External providers

Generally speaking, it was secondary school teachers, rather than their primary colleagues, who were more likely to avail themselves of external trainers. Where LEAs acted as a broker by putting schools in touch with external providers, schools appreciated this advice but were now looking for some indication of quality assurance or a kitemark to help them select trainers. This was, schools believed, a function that the LEA could usefully serve and develop.

More often than not, secondary schools used consultants they were already familiar with or accessed the training and support organised by the central examination boards. Not all interviewees were happy about this arrangement, however:

> '*The examination boards have a big programme of INSET and there are commercial INSET providers. But there is an issue about the whole commercialisation of education that is deeply worrying and offensive. Instead of having the LEA buy in a speaker at a cost of say £200, individual schools now have to pay £200 to go on a course... and because the quality of these* [courses] *is not particularly good and because you have no ownership of it, there is no opportunity for frank exchange*' (secondary head of English).

Further, secondary heads of department described how they often found themselves in the difficult position of managing a limited training budget. Not only did they need to ensure that they (as curriculum leaders) were sufficiently trained to implement curriculum changes, they also needed to respond to the identified training needs of their departmental colleagues. This presented a considerable challenge for some interviewees, who concluded that it was more cost-effective to purchase tailored training for groups of teachers rather than support applications from individuals wanting to attend courses.

Tailored support

In recognition of the difficulties outlined above, there was an effort by LEAs to try to tailor the range of courses offered by analysing OFSTED reports, action plans and School Development Plans and then to plan courses which best met schools' needs and priorities. This would allow a decision to be made whether to provide this as a central course, a cluster arrangement or on an individual level. LEAs also tried to offer a layered package from which schools could either pay for individual courses or opt to enter a service level agreement. An example of how one LEA developed a training package aimed at secondary schools is described below. According to a senior inspector in this LEA, it was a major success: '*It has brought secondary schools back to work with us, made us think of different approaches and forced us to check on the quality of what we do.*'

Illustration 1

Because secondary schools had stopped buying into one LEA's A&I service, officers had attempted to reverse the trend by introducing a new initiative. This LEA decided to put together a series of 25 full-day courses in a way that complemented each other. Schools were involved in influencing the structure of the programme to ensure that it could be mapped on to their own SDP. Originally, the LEA hoped to get between 16 and 20 of the secondary schools interested in the project but in fact was having to run it twice because many more schools committed themselves to it, including some of the former GM schools. About a third of the courses were aimed at headteachers and senior managers, a third at middle managers and the rest at teachers. It could be bought as a package at a cost of around £3,500. This entitled schools to:

- send two representatives to 25 days of courses
- benefit from six additional half-days' advisory support
- access a telephone help-line
- access a good practice database
- take advantage of reductions on other types of support.

School-based training was often the preferred option for both primary and secondary schools. Although it was recognised that this approach limited the opportunities for teachers to network, it was considered to be more valuable, more cost-effective and more flexible than relying on a set programme of courses. Where consultants, advisory teachers or subject advisers had provided this type of support, it was judged by schools to be both relevant and effective. The most common complaint from secondary schools was that LEA subject advisers did not always have the time to provide this type of input. One head of department claimed never to have seen his subject adviser in the past five years. In a different LEA, a secondary head of maths was unaware that the adviser post existed.

Networking opportunities

It was common practice for LEAs to facilitate regular meetings for subject coordinators (primary) or heads of department (secondary). The extent to which advisers were involved varied, but, by and large, apart from organising and convening the meetings, the actual agenda tended to be determined by the headteachers themselves.

Interviews with heads of department confirmed that these meetings were valued greatly. Interestingly, even though LEA advisers took on a relatively minor role in this provision, it was felt that their contribution was vital to the continuation of such groups. In a small number of cases where LEA involvement had necessarily been withdrawn, the majority of groups had lapsed because '*no one had the time or inclination to take it on*'. While heads of department were grateful for the opportunity to network in this way, it was recognised (and regretted) that, since the level of participation in courses had declined, there were few opportunities for their departmental colleagues to network with others.

Another important function in this respect was LEA support for clusters or families of schools. One LEA provided supply cover funding for all schools within a cluster to enable them to release a member of staff to participate in joint training initiatives.

Materials

This aspect of LEA support was not one to which schools assigned a particularly high priority. Curriculum guidance materials were produced in a number of LEAs but, in most cases, these were produced collaboratively by a working group of practitioners. The LEA contribution had been to support projects financially and be responsible for publishing and circulating the end-product. As rule, the larger LEAs were able to produce a more 'polished' range of end-products.

In one LEA, the English adviser circulated a short digest to all schools each term which provided a combination of guidance and practical ideas. It was produced in the format of an official-looking circular rather than an informal newsletter. This simple idea was judged to be '*first-class*' by the teachers who were interviewed.

Support in implementing the National Literacy Strategy

At the time of the research, the National Numeracy Strategy was still in the early stages of implementation so this section focuses only on perceptions about the impact of LEA support in relation to the National Literacy Strategy (NLS).

National targets for literacy were described, in the White Paper *Excellence in Schools*, as both '*ambitious*' and '*challenging*'. The Government duly recognised that in order for 80 per cent of 11-year olds to achieve the

expected standards in the year 2002, there was a need for effective collaboration between the Government, LEAs, schools and parents. The main vehicle for supporting and delivering training (about the NLS) directly to schools was the introduction of literacy consultants, who were to be appointed by LEAs from the Standards Fund. The national operational plan was that all primary and special schools would receive initial training, supported by centrally published materials, and further support would be provided in line with the principle of intervention in inverse proportion to success. A key role for LEAs was the programme of monitoring the implementation of the strategy.

A number of observations were made by interviewees in this study and these are summarised below:

- LEAs reported that they had embraced the strategy enthusiastically and had received helpful support from their regional advisers. This enthusiasm was communicated to schools from the way in which LEAs delivered the initial training and the fact that the strategy was made '*part and parcel of the fabric of LEA work*'.
- Initially, the structure of the NLS was perceived to be rigid and this created anxiety for some schools. LEAs appeared to play a major role by helping schools to interpret the requirements more flexibly and by raising the confidence of teachers. Some LEAs had used this approach from the outset, whereas others, which had delivered the guidance according the script that they were given, were subsequently trying to persuade teachers that '*literacy can be fun*!' Demonstration lessons were extremely helpful in raising awareness about the interpretation of the NLS structure but this had resource implications.
- Small primary schools and special schools felt that the NLS (in the way that it was presented) bore little relevance to their particular needs. Some LEAs had responded by producing further guidance for mixed-age class teachers but as far as special schools, in four of the five LEAs, were concerned, there was insufficient expertise in LEAs to address the issues that they raised. Staff in special schools held the view that every time a new initiative was introduced, the onus was on them to adapt and modify it. These teachers acknowledged that the consultants and advisers wished to support them more effectively but were having to inform themselves first, about the nature and needs of special schools.
- Despite the appointment of literacy consultants, the LEA's coordinating and monitoring role had substantial implications for A&I service staffing structures. The involvement of English advisers in terms of overall management and the programme of monitoring the Literacy Hour was reported to have impacted adversely on LEAs' capacity to maintain their general programme of link work with all schools. One small LEA had solved this problem by asking headteachers to volunteer as additional monitors in other

schools; another had gained additional funding from the SRB to appoint extra consultants.

- More positively, the NLS was perceived to have been extremely helpful in enabling advisers to access classrooms and engage in dialogue with teachers. Also, it was felt to be a useful catalyst for bringing schools together with a common purpose and assisted in the process of spreading best practice. One officer believed that the structure and planning related to the NLS had actually helped to prevent some schools from being placed under special measures.

- The expectation that only a minority of schools would require additional support (in order to implement the NLS) was perhaps unrealistic. In practice, most LEAs tried to find ways of offering supplementary support to all schools. This had implications for resourcing. Some schools, which had initially been designated 'light-touch' were found to require additional support at a later stage. In areas with a high turnover of teachers, there were considerable implications for training. Elsewhere, a primary headteacher described how the LEA literacy consultant had given the school '*some of her own time*' because the literacy coordinator was on maternity leave and the consultant believed that schools at the top end were not being allocated enough support.

- LEAs sometimes found themselves in a difficult mediating role which had implications for LEA–school relationships. One problem that was identified was the hostile response of some headteachers in schools that had been placed in the 'intensive support' category and the perceived stigma attached to this. Another problem was the hostility expressed by some KS2 teachers who felt threatened by the demands and the expected depth of knowledge.

- The input from literacy consultants and LEA advisers was highly valued by the vast majority of primary teachers who were interviewed. The most frequently mentioned contribution was the fact that LEAs made the national guidance and materials more manageable and easier to digest. Of the 18 primary and special schools in the study, staff in only one (primary) held the view that the NLS could have been implemented effectively without the support of the LEA (providing there had been sufficient time available). The comments below were more typical:

  '*Even though we are what they consider to be a "light-touch" school, without LEA support, I don't think we could have implemented it.*'

  '*If I had had to do it all on my own, I would have been totally overwhelmed.*'

4.2 Provision of performance data

Although all schools should have access to national performance and benchmark data, there is an expectation on LEAs to prepare and provide wider benchmark data in order to help schools compare themselves more effectively with other schools in the LEA. According to the White Paper *Excellence in Schools*, these data should be presented in a form that is easily accessed and understood for use with target setting. This section reports briefly on the LEA response to that requirement. (A more detailed examination of the target-setting process is contained in Chapter 2.)

Overall, there was a consensus amongst officers and schools that data collection was now becoming more rigorous and more systematic. Many interviewees described a period of evolution. LEAs were gradually overcoming some of the initial hurdles outlined below and were fairly optimistic about the quality of information they would be able to provide schools with in the near future. The majority of schools appeared to find the LEA data quite helpful but varied in their ability to use it effectively.

Officers in nine of the ten LEAs reported that they were making a conscious and determined effort to develop this aspect of the role. While the remaining LEA claimed to have long-established procedures for data collection, it was acknowledged that more work was required in terms of analysis.

At the time of the research, most LEAs were approaching the stage of:

- establishing an individual pupil database
- providing data electronically
- including a wider range of contextual data.

There was also a move towards identifying individual schools by name in the LEA data profiles, rather than providing 'anonymous' comparisons, as this was felt to be more beneficial. This practice was already established in a small number of LEAs but several others were in the process of consulting with schools. In LEAs where schools were named, an agreement had been drawn up with all headteachers, to protect against the potential abuse of such data for purposes of propaganda.

Initial obstacles

Although the newer LEAs were well placed to design appropriate systems and structures, they were sometimes disadvantaged in that reliable, historical data were less accessible to them. One officer described how a private company had been contracted to uncover historical data that could be not be accessed from either the former LEA or the DfEE. Only one LEA reported difficulties in gaining information from former GM schools; others had not found this to be a problem.

> '*In the past we didn't get data from them* [GM schools] *but surprisingly, in some ways, those two schools were more keen than*

the others to contribute. But I think we have good relations with them and they value the feedback they have had. So they have been more than happy to comply' (information officer).

There were more problems initially in accessing data from the central agencies than from schools. Delays in the publication of national test results by the QCA were described as unhelpful by several interviewees, but it was agreed that these were 'teething problems' rather than ongoing concerns.

It was accepted that not all of the new LEAs had originally invested sufficiently in this area of work and had subsequently needed to make further staff appointments. Two of the new LEAs admitted that this aspect of the LEA's work had been sidelined initially because of a lack of time and resources. One LEA admitted that this was still its '*weakest area*'. In the more established LEAs, some newly appointed statisticians were in the process of reviewing and reorganising systems to meet the demands.

Generally speaking, LEA advisers perceived a wide variation in the ability of schools to understand and analyse the range of LEA data that was provided. There was evidence to suggest that in some areas, more detailed training (for both school staff and advisers) would have been helpful. Not all advisers had sufficient time to sit down with headteachers to check for their understanding. Consequently, some statisticians found themselves visiting schools to explain the data and to clarify misunderstandings. Although this was largely an *ad hoc* response by LEAs in this study, other research suggests that more systematic involvement by LEA statisticians in schools can be an effective strategy (Hayes and Rutt, 1999).

As a rule, secondary schools were better equipped to receive and use the data more independently, as there was usually a senior member of staff who had specific responsibility (and non-contact time) in order to address this.

A few LEA interviewees said that they had sensed resistance (to the use of data analysis) amongst some primary headteachers, particularly those in small schools. This was partly because data relating to small cohorts was perceived as less reliable, but also teaching heads generally had less time to spend on data analysis. However, as this officer pointed out:

'*Most are now coming to accept that they have no alternative. Like it or not, they are going to be looked at in the light of their data and it is clearly important that they understand it because there is a difference between explanations and excuses.*'

Feedback from the advisers' target-setting visits had alerted LEAs about the difficulties facing small schools in relation to data analysis, and measures were being taken to address these specific needs. There was also a major issue for special schools in relation to benchmarking and comparative analysis (see Chapter 2).

Mainstream schools with designated provision for pupils with special educational needs could also feel disadvantaged because of the way in which their overall results were presented. In one LEA, two versions of comparative tables were produced: one included the results of pupils in the designated provision (in accordance with statutory requirements) and the other did not. This response had been questioned by the DfEE and, according to one interviewee, the LEA had been reminded that '*parents are intelligent enough to work that out for themselves!*'

4.3 Dissemination of good practice

According to the Code of Practice, the Government expects all schools to look outwards and to keep in touch with the development of best practice. Within a climate of partnership, LEAs have a role in the identification, celebration and dissemination of successful practice. Further, all schools '*and particularly the most successful*' have a contribution to make in sharing good practice.

As part of this NFER study, researchers asked interviewees to describe how good practice was identified and shared between schools. From their responses, it was evident that LEA advisers were generally enthusiastic and positive about the development of this aspect of their role and the main strategies are summarised and outlined below. LEAs all mentioned between two and four of the strategies described in this section. The effectiveness of practice in schools identified through self-evaluation was more difficult, since many of the initiatives they described had not been fully implemented at the time of the interviews, but a number of issues were highlighted by interviewees and these are reported at the end of this section.

Network groups

Nine of the ten LEAs cited networking groups as a major catalyst for sharing good practice. This was also the strategy most likely to be mentioned by the teachers in the schools, who appreciated the opportunity to come together on a regular basis with colleagues outside their own schools. Both LEA-wide curriculum panel meetings and school cluster configurations were described as useful conduits for effective communication in this respect. As mentioned previously, it was the practical involvement of the LEA in convening and facilitating the meetings that the schools valued. Teachers preferred to determine the content of the agenda themselves.

Central register/database

Four LEAs were in the process of drawing up a register or database of good practice in schools. All schools in these areas had been contacted and invited to submit an indication of their perceived strengths. The next stage was for

an LEA adviser to visit responding schools for the purpose of validation. In one of the LEAs, it was emphasised that in order to promote a partnership model, the onus would be on participating schools to invite an LEA representative in to validate, rather than having a visit imposed upon them.

Newsletter or other LEA publication

In four LEAs, regular or intermittent publications were described as an important vehicle for disseminating good practice. These ranged from a newsletter, circulated two or three times a year, in which schools were invited to submit articles or invitations for colleagues to visit, to more expensively produced ring binders which contained examples of good practice put together by working groups of practitioners.

Facilitating visits by teachers to other schools

Despite the recent introduction of demonstration lessons associated with the National Literacy Strategy, this approach was adopted and extended as a means of spreading good practice generally in less than half of the LEAs in this study. In one LEA, which had previously supported a comprehensive programme of Literacy Hour demonstration lessons, a planned schedule of teacher exchanges and shadowing placements was attracting little interest, even though funding was available for supply cover. Possible reasons for this are suggested in the following section.

One-off visits to other schools were, however, considered to be particularly valuable for teachers in small schools, who had less opportunity to share ideas and compare practice with a range of colleagues. This approach was also appreciated by newly appointed heads of department. In the main, schools that were visited were recommended by advisers, but this was not always a straightforward issue, as discussed below. It was important that the selection of host schools was based on a system which allowed all schools to contribute, otherwise, headteachers could feel quite resentful.

Specific projects

Four of the authorities had planned or recently established specific LEA projects aimed at encouraging a culture of sharing and celebrating good practice. These included a project to encourage classroom-based research activities and two initiatives involving the use of focus group meetings. A fourth LEA had developed and implemented a project which highlighted aspects of good practice in a different primary school each half-term (as described below):

Illustration 2

LEA advisers asked the primary schools to pick out an aspect of their work that they did well and every half-term, one school was asked to host an open twilight session, which was open to all teachers in the LEA. These had been extremely popular, attracting up to 80 teachers at a time. They provided teachers with an informal opportunity to wander around the school, talk to colleagues about the strategies they employed, and look at the resources they used. Then, for the second half of each session, the teachers went into the hall for a short presentation and an opportunity to ask further questions.

'It was really good for the staff, because although our results were low, we still had staff from other schools coming here to learn from them. That was great for morale!' (primary headteacher).

Opportunities for disseminating good practice via in-service training

INSET was mentioned by officers in three LEAs as a good mechanism for sharing best practice. The most effective approach was judged to be where teachers worked collaboratively on a task or problem-solving exercise. In one LEA, the INSET model was almost always predicated around a task group made up of 'good' practitioners who designed and delivered the programme having first undertaken some investigative work.

Issues for LEAs to consider

Although the business of disseminating and celebrating good educational practice is not a new function for LEAs, the current culture of autonomous, self-improving schools presents certain challenges for LEAs in fulfilling this responsibility. A number of issues were identified by many of the advisers and teachers who were interviewed. These are illustrated below:

Sensitivity is paramount

When recommending practice worth looking at in other schools, it was considered important for advisers to:

- Avoid endorsing schools in the same catchment area which might be in direct competition for prospective pupils (or perhaps where there was tension in relation to selection or exclusion issues).
- Avoid selecting schools on a habitual or *ad hoc* basis. This irritated teachers and could be perceived as divisive: *'There's an important visitor coming so we all know which school they'll be visiting, don't we?'* A more open and transparent system of identifying and celebrating good practice would avoid overburdening the same teachers and give all schools an opportunity to celebrate areas of strength.

- Ensure that schools were matched in a way which encouraged and stimulated teachers as opposed to making them feel inadequate. As one adviser explained:

  'You have to be aware that if you show school A something outstanding in school B, it can actually have the effect of being demoralising for them. What you need is to show them school C, which is just a bit better than they are at it.'

Disadvantages of self-nomination

Where LEAs rely largely on schools to nominate themselves in relation to good practice, there may be a mismatch in terms of perception. Whilst validation visits from advisers may be effective in eliminating practice which is merely mediocre in relation to other schools, examples of excellent practice may well remain unearthed if the school chooses not to self-nominate. When asked whether, in their experience, schools were generally willing to share good practice, most advisers confirmed this to be the case. However, a number of examples were then offered which suggested that many schools were inclined to be guarded or over-modest about their good practice and although teachers were happy to share practice commended by their adviser, there appeared to be a greater risk attached to self-nomination.

Advisers were also sometimes placed in an uncomfortable position when schools in their area had (to the LEA's surprise) achieved Beacon status or some other accolade through self-nomination, rather than through LEA recommendations. This was a difficulty raised by officers in four of the LEAs. One gave the following example:

> *'It was one of those schools in the middle there...it could do better. It had a reasonable OFSTED but one or two criticisms and hadn't met its targets for SATs results. But then we find out it is a Beacon school and the press are asking me for comments. What do you say? Because everyone in the area knows that it's not! It is a really silly thing and I don't know what they hope to get out of it. It could turn out to be a bit of an embarrassment'* (senior adviser).

In another LEA, a primary headteacher explained that she was '*saddened*' by the response of the Director of Education when the school's achievements were reported in the press. The headteacher's interpretation was that the Director did not want to see any one school being held up as an example above others. As a result, the staff felt their success had been rebuked.

Identifying and sharing practice requires time and resources

Although the Code of Practice recognises that LEA visits may be necessary to help identify examples of good practice, this was not always a practical option for LEAs. Advisers and heads admitted that any identification of good practice during the focused monitoring visits was likely to be superficial due to the limitation of time. More positively, the cycle of monitoring programmes undertaken by advisers during the implementation

of the National Literacy Strategy had provided a useful opportunity for gaining access to classrooms to talk to teachers and observe good practice. However, unless LEAs employed a team of subject advisers who were involved in subject reviews, or a number of advisory teachers who worked alongside colleagues in classrooms, it was difficult to find the time to identify good practice in this way. Also, as one headteacher pointed out:

> '*They do what they can* [to identify good practice] *but they are not in classrooms enough and the only schools they spend a lot of time in are those in difficulty.*'

One LEA adviser explained that this problem could be partially overcome by seeking out (and following up) evidence of good practice arising from the school performance data that were available, but overall, schools did not discern much proactivity by the LEA in this respect. In a minority of cases, headteachers that were interviewed were quite offended that no one from the LEA had canvassed them, despite having received very good OFSTED reports. A number of others believed that LEAs should ask headteachers more often about the things they tackled well. This was a particular condemnation by senior managers in one successful former grant-maintained school, where the chair of governors concluded: '*If they* [LEA officers] *were willing to listen, they might get some advice from here!*'

A number of teachers agreed that a greater development and sharing of good practice could be achieved if they were released periodically from the classroom to observe or work with other colleagues. However, even when teachers were provided with opportunities to visit other schools, this had to be balanced with other priorities in their own schools. Teachers' main concerns were with keeping abreast of changes and coping with pressures on a day-to-day level, and the prospect of taking some time out to look at practice elsewhere may be an aspiration rather than a viable option. Some heads of department admitted that they had turned down such opportunities for this reason.

> '*We just don't have the time to go out and investigate what other people are doing.*'

> '*Most of the time, you are just trying to get on with your job and you haven't got time to stop and have long discussions or visits other schools or even sit back and think about how you might tackle something differently.*'

Teachers who worked in geographically isolated or rural areas faced additional problems in establishing and maintaining professional contact with colleagues in other establishments. One head of department thought that training videos (such as those produced by the Teacher Training Agency) were the most useful means of spreading good practice between schools. In his view, flexibility and accessibility were the key to getting good advice and useful ideas into schools. The video tapes had been successfully used during departmental meetings to infuse new ideas and stimulate discussion.

A small number of middle managers in schools suggested that a rolling programme of sabbatical leave for teachers could provide a good opportunity to develop and share good practice. In one LEA, this was achieved essentially by seconding good practitioners into the advisory service.

Sharing practice more widely

Although some of the smaller LEAs reported a close collegiate relationship between headteachers and schools, which was conducive to the effective sharing of good practice, it was also acknowledged that there was a danger of becoming quite inward-looking and insular. In recognition of this, some advisers spoke about schemes to develop wider links, often involving universities. One LEA for example, had a jointly funded arrangement whereby invited speakers from outside the area delivered presentations at meetings and conferences to help broaden the spectrum of good practice.

The problem of sharing between a limited number or range of schools was also mentioned by some headteachers who enjoyed the close working relationship with other similar schools in their school cluster or family group, but admitted that this could become quite '*incestuous*'. One LEA had deliberately constructed the cluster groups to ensure that they contained a wide mix of schools from different geographical areas.

4.4 Support for headteachers

Interviews with LEA advisers, governors and headteachers contained many references to the mounting pressures and sense of professional isolation typically associated with the headteacher role.

> '*The role is so isolated. I have good senior staff but nevertheless ... you do need a critical friend*' (primary headteacher).

> '*Sometimes they need someone to talk to because they have just got overwhelmed*' (senior officer).

> '*They need someone to refer to and, at the end of the day, if things go wrong, they want someone to blame*' (special school governor).

Chairs of governors realised that the support they were able to offer their headteacher was often moral rather than professional. Advisers who had themselves been headteachers recognised the importance of LEA support although they were aware that the new-style monitoring visits did not necessarily allow for the kind of collegiate professional exchange that had previously taken place between headteachers and their link advisers (see Chapter 3). Apart from four secondary and one primary school headteacher, the other headteachers involved in the study all agreed that LEA support for them (as individuals and professionals) was vital. Often, it was the perceived quality of the link adviser that was considered first and foremost when evaluating LEA support but even in those cases where the level of

link adviser support had been drastically reduced (perhaps due to staffing shortages), headteachers still recognised and appreciated the wider influence of the LEA. The headteachers who placed less importance on LEA support generally did not speak as highly of their link adviser and tended to be from high-achieving schools.

Other sources of support

Alternative sources of support provided by headteacher groups and professional associations were more likely to be granted at least equal merit by the more experienced headteachers and those who had worked in former grant-maintained schools. In one or two cases, where experienced headteachers belonged to an established cluster group, they had developed a stronger relationship with those colleagues than with their link adviser. One secondary headteacher maintained that the cabinet-style senior management team in his school was large, competent and robust enough to provide the full range of support he required.

By and large, headteachers did not feel able to seek any form of professional support from their governing body and the balance was inevitably tilted in the opposite direction. A number of headteachers in this sample were quite critical in their reflections about the role of governors.

> '*I don't think I would like to feel that I didn't have the support of the LEA and only the governors. It is more that I give support to the governors in helping them to do* ***their*** *job. They need educating about the sort of issues they are having to deal with. At the end of the day, I have to manage how they operate!*' (primary headteacher).

> '*To be quite honest, my strategy with governors is more about trying to work out ways to do what I want to do and minimise the extent to which they interfere. So I suppose I actually see the LEA more of an ally in helping me keep them* [the governors] *on track*'. (secondary headteacher).

Encouragement and recognition

One of the things that primary headteachers, in particular, mentioned was the importance of having their achievements recognised and commented on by the LEA. One primary headteacher, who said that she looked to the LEA as her employer, felt that LEAs needed to maintain a '*management*' role: '*The LEA should be telling us how well we are doing sometimes. That is a good basic management skill.*'

Others confirmed that it was appreciated and made them feel valued when Directors of Education sent letters of congratulations or cards wishing good luck prior to an OFSTED inspection, for example. These simple gestures were seen as a symbol of partnership and ongoing support but not every LEA displayed that level of attention. In one authority with a high ratio of

advisers to schools, a headteacher of a secondary school that was not causing concern admitted:

> '*I am actually leaving this post and this is my decision totally. Nobody from the LEA has come to me and asked why I am doing this. I am not taking early retirement because I am too young. Basically, I have decided that enough is enough. So there hasn't been that sort of personal support, no.*'

Dependency on the LEA

Some advisers observed that a minority of headteachers tried to use the LEA to convey difficult or unpleasant messages instead of facing up to difficult situations themselves. For example:

> '*Some heads will try to use you to do the dirty work they should be doing. We are getting firmer with them about that or you just end up being the "baddy" – which is exactly what the head wants*' (link adviser).

In some respects, the conditions brought about by Fair Funding arrangements had actually assisted advisers in curbing the dependency model that the minority of headteachers chose to cling to when they found themselves in difficult circumstances. This was illustrated by the experience of one primary link adviser below:

> '*I had a very upset head who wanted me to go in and support with a capability issue but there was no money to pay for my time. I said "I can't then, I'm afraid." She said" 'Oh,... but you have to." I had to say it was her responsibility and if she wasn't prepared to tackle it alone there was an issue in terms of leadership and management. She was livid! But I spoke to her a couple of days later and she admitted I had been right. That teacher concerned is now coming on leaps and bounds and it was actually far more effective for the head to take the lead role in that than me. But it was a harsh lesson and the governors certainly didn't like it – thinking "Nasty LEA!"*'" (link adviser).

It was also suggested that in the past, the level of support available to headteachers was too often dependent on the '*cosiness*' of the working relationship between heads and their link advisers. The frequency of visits sometimes had more to do with how well the two individuals got on together rather than reflecting the needs of the school in general. The changes brought about by increased delegation and the Code of Practice had thus prescribed a significant culture shift for some advisers and headteachers. In some cases, headteachers had elected to buy in additional professional support for themselves. One LEA had established a confidential counselling service for headteachers. Others offered enhanced support or a mentoring service for new headteachers. However, there was also evidence to suggest (as mentioned in Chapter 3) that many advisers tried hard to accommodate the needs of headteachers by allowing them to seek professional advice outside of the focused agenda.

Generally speaking, headteachers of small primary schools were considered by advisers to be more dependent on their LEA than colleagues in larger schools due to their greater teaching commitments and the fact that they had fewer staff to cover all areas of expertise. Across the board, however, headteachers relied quite heavily on the support advice of the LEA's personnel department.

'Low-key' support

It became apparent from the interviews that a certain amount of underpinning support for individual headteachers was often veiled or invisible to others. The study revealed that a good deal of important yet subtle preventative work was typically taking place even though this was not immediately obvious to others in their evaluation of the LEA role. This vital yet 'low-key' category of support was also evident in other aspects of the LEA role (this is explored further in the following chapter). One adviser described how she worked with a small group of demoralised headteachers.

> *'I work with three headteachers whose self-esteem was so low after OFSTED – it was so public and humiliating. We meet up and all go off for the day with a focus, to visit other schools, talk to the heads about how they manage a particular issue. We have lunch together and talk about what we have heard and seen. We analyse why we think something is good practice etc. We do this once a term. It has made such a difference. I particularly chose schools where the headteacher said things like "God ... I felt like chucking the job in five times last term because it was so awful" – yet seeing these wonderful schools – it made them realise that people felt the same as them and had dragged the school kicking and screaming to that point. I also took them to very different heads to show that there is not a stereotypical model to which they must aspire but we looked at criteria for what makes a good leader and manager and discussed that. They know they can do it now and it has made such a big difference.'*

Interestingly, one headteacher who was interviewed from the same LEA as this adviser believed that professional support for headteachers had become virtually non-existent in that authority.

It was also apparent that new headteachers who had been appointed to improve schools that had been placed in special measures generally worked in close partnership with their LEA to implement the necessary changes. Often, at first, relationships between the new headteacher and staff and governors were difficult and strained. In some cases, the LEA had protected the previous head by keeping the extent of their concerns confidential, but whatever the circumstances, staff and governors would typically feel bruised by the outcome of the OFSTED report. An incoming headteacher might, therefore, look to the LEA for morale support and encouragement. Under different circumstances, an LEA adviser described how he had found it necessary to '*defend*' a couple of heads against '*voracious governors*' who held unrealistically high expectations about their role.

In another LEA, a support service for headteachers had been established. On the face of it, this was a team of supply headteachers who could be called upon to cover at short notice. In practice, these experienced professionals were used to support and work alongside heads and acting heads who might benefit from temporary support for personal or professional reasons. The same authority also operated a 'critical incident' telephone helpline serviced by nominated officers day and night for 52 weeks a year. As a senior officer pointed out:

> *'People may not see that as school improvement ... but it helps schools to get back on track and on with the business of improvement.'*

4.5 Support for governors

The organisation of governor support services

In all but one of the LEAs, the head of the governor support service came from a background in education, either as an officer, adviser, teacher or headteacher. In six of the LEAs, the person with the lead responsibility for governor services combined this role with a number of other strategic duties. Of these, two were senior advisers/inspectors, while in three other LEAs, the role was incorporated into the pupil and parent support officer's role. In the sixth case, the overall lead on governor support was the responsibility of an area Schools' Officer.

In the remaining four LEAs, the head of governor support had no major role within the LEA other than to coordinate this service. One of these had a comparatively large team of more than ten colleagues to manage directly, and two others worked in large rural LEAs with relatively small teams. The fourth was a smaller, unitary authority where the lead officer worked with one assistant.

Governor support teams in this study were fairly homogeneous in terms of size even though the LEAs themselves ranged from small unitary authorities to large shire counties. Although two LEA teams were larger than the rest, with around ten members in each, teams of three, four or five people were more common.

In all governor support units, clerical or administrative assistants were deemed to be a necessary component of the team. Three LEAs had appointed (or were in the process of appointing) their own specific training and development workers but most services either contracted tutors (often other governors), LEA advisers/officers, or bought into neighbouring LEAs to deliver training support.

Governor recruitment

In terms of school governor recruitment, LEAs in this study were divided in the amount of support they provided. The problem of recruitment appeared to be greater in more rural areas where local communities were

smaller and, consequently, officers here were actively involved in the mounting of enrolment campaigns to help fill the large numbers of vacant positions across the LEA. One officer reported more than 600 vacancies. In two other LEAs, which were small and urban, officers worked hard to ensure that all sections of the community were more widely represented on governing bodies through targeted recruitment campaigns. Overall, half of the LEAs in this study were quite heavily involved in recruitment issues, for example in the compilation of potential governor registers or the provision of pre-governor training sessions. In the remaining five LEAs, governor recruitment was not considered to be a high priority and this was dealt with more directly at school level.

The most commonly raised issue concerned the LEA representative governor. The main issues related to the delays often associated with the recruitment of LEA governors as well as poor attendance and a perceived lack of interest by some politically aligned governors. Some governor support officers reported that they were looking for solutions to help schools to recruit and retain effective LEA governors. These included:

- the development of a recruitment programme in which potential LEA governors were interviewed prior to appointment
- seminars for LEA governors that were organised and delivered by LEA officers, followed by discussions in political groupings
- inviting prospective LEA governors to submit a statement of intent
- negotiating for a percentage of LEA governors overall to be non-aligned politically
- publishing details about the non-attendance of LEA governors in committee reports.

Training

Generally, the governors who were interviewed in this study were not particularly enthusiastic about the quality of training programmes offered by their LEAs. Courses were described as '*not very imaginative*' or '*not terribly inspiring*'. It should be taken into account however, that interviewees were predominantly chairs of governing bodies and were therefore likely to be fairly experienced governors. In a few cases, LEAs had recognised the need to differentiate governor training for the very reason that more experienced governors were less likely to enrol for courses.

In seven authorities, schools were offered a service level agreement and/or a menu of training opportunities from which governors could select and purchase. There was some evidence to suggest that schools were unwilling to invest heavily in governor training. One officer in an LEA which offered training on a 'pay-as-you-use' basis admitted that the schools were not being charged enough to cover the cost of courses but '*if we charge any more, they won't come*'. Another officer reported that some secondary schools which did not buy into the LEA training programme had subsequently failed to use the earmarked Standards Fund allowance for any governor training purposes. In an attempt to address such issues, some governor services

claimed to be moving towards providing more customised training packages. Training for the whole governing body or cluster group delivery were emerging as more popular options than LEA-wide courses. This mirrors the trend that was reported in relation to curriculum development for teachers. Relevance and cost- effectiveness were major considerations for schools operating within a limited budget, but in-house or tailored provision was inevitably more expensive for LEAs to provide.

In the remaining three LEAs, the provision for governor training was fairly limited. Courses were linked to the core EDP priorities and there was, typically, no direct charge made to schools for this service. A number of interviewees mentioned the importance of LEA support for governors in performing their monitoring role.

Other support

In the majority of cases, there was no longer an expectation for LEA officers or advisers to attend governors' meetings as a matter of routine. This pattern was adopted partly because it reflected the school self-management agenda and partly because it was not physically possible for 'lean' LEA teams in some areas to manage such a function. Although some governors and headteachers who were interviewed said they missed this type of support, others concluded that this had been a fairly ineffective use of resources in the past and if the LEA provided detailed briefing notes, then the physical presence of an officer was not necessary.

Three LEAs, however, had retained this level of involvement and had an agreement with schools which allowed the attendance of an LEA representative at between one and six governors' meetings a year. The representatives were either link advisers, senior officers or special governor support officers. The advantage of this approach was that it provided the LEA with a good opportunity to learn about its schools in greater depth and therefore be better placed to pre-empt or detect potential issues. A further three LEAs provided a clerking service to schools which essentially fulfilled similar objectives.

> *'The role is not just about taking minutes, it is about being a representative of the authority. Clerks may also raise issues for us as an authority, i.e. concerns on consultation procedures. So it is like a two-way information sharing.'*

> *'Clerks go out as representatives of the authority and as people who are well enough informed to be able to understand both council policy and governance so that they are clearly able to offer good advice to the governors about how to go about dealing with things. It's not just about taking minutes.'*

> *'We raise issues through the clerk and promote awareness that way... Some have been bringing back concerns – saying "I'm a bit unhappy about such and such ... is that right?"'*

Although there were exceptions, in the smaller LEAs there tended to be a greater emphasis on maintaining links with the work of governing bodies either though the customary attendance of LEA representatives at governing body meetings, or through the routine checking of minutes. Almost every LEA had a system whereby governing bodies were expected to submit copies of minutes. Most, however, did not have the back-up or the resources to ensure that this was strictly adhered to. In the six LEAs where there was regular LEA representation in the way of officers or clerks, this in itself was not an issue because there was already a good two-way flow of information and awareness. In the other four LEAs, the collection of minutes was perceived to be a rather hollow exercise if there were insufficient resources to make use of them. As one officer explained:

> *'The minutes are sent in here, so in theory any issues would get picked up. In practice, we don't have time to chase minutes that don't come in and those that do get a cursory glance and may not pick up any discrepancies. So although that is one way of checking on what is happening out there, I don't think we make as much use of that as we could.'*

In the larger LEAs, schools were typically divided up and linked to named support staff in order to help develop working relationships. The other main source of communication and support was the telephone helpline, a common feature of LEA provision which was valued by governors and headteachers alike. This was important, not only for governors seeking routine advice, but also for those who wished to draw attention to issues which required mediation.

> '*When relationships have broken down, say between the head and the chair, that can't always be detected in the minutes. So there is a reliance on someone informing the LEA in order for them to mediate. They are very good at conciliation and very experienced in these things*' (primary, chair of governors).

Other forms of support included governor newsletters, which provided useful information and reminders about training opportunities and new initiatives, regular briefing meetings for chairs and clerks, printed guidance on specific topics, and packs to help with administrative duties.

The types of LEA support which governors valued the most, however, were advice relating to personnel and finance issues and practical support in the appointment of headteachers. These are discussed further in the following sections. Support for governors in schools with serious concerns about the quality of leadership and management is described in Chapter 5.

Appointment of headteachers

While the responsibility for appointing headteachers rests with the governing body, the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (GB. Statutes, 1998) gives LEA officers a new power to make written representations if they

object to any names on the shortlist for headteacher appointments in maintained schools. The shortlist must be sent to the LEA. The criteria for making a formal representation are:

- if a candidate is currently, or was recently, the headteacher or a senior teacher at a school in special measures or with serious weakness due in part or whole to deficiencies attributable to the candidate's performance
- if standards of performance at the candidate's previous school(s) had declined for reasons attributable to the candidate
- if the candidate has insufficient experience
- if there has been a pattern of complaints against the candidate
- if there has been a suspension of the budget in the candidate's previous school(s) for reasons of mismanagement attributable to the candidate.

The representation does not mean the governing body is prohibited from appointing the candidate but it must send the LEA a written response setting out the panel's reasons. This study found that, in practice, LEA officers and chairs of governors favoured an altogether more interventionist model. Awareness about the crucial impact of high-quality leadership on a school's ability to improve was such that governors welcomed the security of professional advice and, as stakeholders, LEAs wished to exercise a closer overview of the whole procedure.

To illustrate, one senior officer described an example in which, two years previously, a governing body had appointed a headteacher (who was the then deputy head) against the advice of the senior officers involved. Despite making '*very strong representations*' to the governors, the appointment was made. This officer believed that in retrospect, there should have been more direct involvement at the shortlisting stage. As a result of the appointment, this had become a high-intervention school. It was described as '*a ridiculous situation*' because the cost of that appointment to the LEA had been '*absolutely phenomenal*' requiring more than 60 visits in the course of a year.

In the majority of LEAs, support for governors in the selection and recruitment of headteachers was judged so important that it was included as a core activity in the Education Development Plan. In some areas, there was already a history and expectation of LEA involvement; in others, targets had been set to sharpen and increase the practice more widely. This included one LEA with a large number of Foundation schools, which were (according to one headteacher) likely to resist such LEA intervention, preferring instead to continue using independent consultants or professional associations for support with recruitment. The chair of governors accepted that the school might be '*obliged*' to have someone from the LEA present but was not convinced this would inspire confidence in the governing body.

All the LEAs aimed to provide some support for governors in this respect and in most cases it was written into policy and provided without charge. In LEAs where the link adviser supported schools in a generic way, this type of support for governors was included in their brief. In other areas, it was a senior adviser/officer who would be assigned to coordinate the recruitment procedure. Several governor training programmes included courses on recruitment procedures; others delivered whole- governing body training, following notification of a headteacher's resignation. Typically, governors were supported throughout the entire recruitment and selection process, from the drafting of the advertisement to the debriefing discussions after the interviews. In most cases, the range of administrative tasks was undertaken by LEA staff and, in a minority of cases, the LEA actually hosted the interviews in premises away from the school.

Despite this level of support, all interviewees agreed strongly that the final decision to appoint was the duty of governing body alone. Interestingly, no officer reported any disagreement with the final choice of candidate, where there had been LEA involvement. This suggests that officers may be exerting some influence but only one or two governors described ever having felt any '*pressure*' from the LEA to appoint a '*favoured*' candidate. If governors were well supported throughout the process, they were more likely to feel confident about making decisions in the final stage. As one officer explained:

> '*At the end of the day, we do the questioning (if that is what they want), we summarise the interviews and then say "Right it is over to you now to select one of the candidates." We just sit there and watch their reaction. They sometimes ask what we think but we never push it. However, if we found them going down the route of somebody who was not particularly good, we might just remind them what it was they were looking for in a head, but really the skill is making sure the shortlist is right in the first place.*'

If governors were not totally sure about the appointment, they were inclined to look to officers for advice on options such as readvertising or the availability of professional development to help successful candidates meet certain requirements.

The views of governors

> '*I don't think that governors could carry on in an adequate way without the support of the LEA*' (special school governor).

The overwhelming majority of governors (23 out of 25) across all phases were united in the view that elements of LEA support for governing bodies were '*vital*', '*crucial*' and '*essential*'. Only two governors in this study felt that LEA support was anything less than necessary in empowering them to fulfil their responsibilities. Both of these interviewees were fairly dismissive about their LEA's involvement. One was a governor in a Foundation school who had an unusually high level of professional expertise and the other was a governor in a primary school which had experienced a difficult relationship with the LEA during a period of special measures.

Half of the governors, across all phases, thought that the advice and support they were able to access for personnel issues were a key contribution. There was a realisation, even amongst governors who were experienced in recruiting and managing staff in their own place of work, that without the support of an experienced team of educational personnel advisers, they could all too easily find themselves in difficulty over contractual and disciplinary issues.

> '*It would be very easy to get into a total minefield*' (special school governor).

> '*I am sure that without LEAs* [to guide them] *an awful lot of governors would find themselves attending industrial tribunals. I am sure that would happen and then, as other governors around the country realised what was happening, there would be a mass exodus. They would retire in their droves if they felt under threat because they are not getting paid to do this – they are giving up their time and their goodwill. Without an LEA to give them that important legal advice and guidance ...well! And imagine if you had to buy it! The LEA is a huge buffer between schools and the hard knocks out there*' (primary governor).

Many governors re-emphasised that they were lay people who simply did not have the depth of experience and specialist knowledge that was required.

> *'I would be camping outside David Blunkett's office if the LEA wasn't here. We are lay people and we really need their support'* (primary governor).

Only one governing body chose not to use the services of its LEA personnel department. In this school, an external consultant was used as and when required, although most responsibility clearly rested with the senior management team.

Other aspects that were valued most by governors were:

- LEA guidance in budgetary control and monitoring procedures
- LEA support in the recruitment of headteachers
- LEA help with digesting/implementing central initiatives and reducing bureaucratic burdens
- LEA support with parental appeals and complaints
- LEA support with monitoring the quality of teaching.

Most governors were unclear about their responsibilities in relation to the latter point.

> '*I think it is essential that LEA advisers do the monitoring in classrooms because we are not qualified to do that. We do our best to monitor but we are not professionals with that educational background.*' (primary governor).

LEAs described how they felt the need to advise governors on this and how they encouraged them to establish an agreed code of conduct. Without that level of support, some governors were reluctant to become involved:

> *'It is the head's responsibility but HMI asked me how I knew what was happening in classrooms. I told her what the head and others had told me. "No," she said. "How do* ***you*** *know what's going on?" So we were then instructed to do this thing where I could inspect the head inspecting the teachers! We haven't done that – I think it is a bit silly, but it is a major issue if you don't have a head who makes sure they are in touch with classroom practice. Without a local authority, I think it would be an absolutely dreadful responsibility. I don't think the job of chair of governors would be tenable'* (primary governor).

Interestingly, LEA support in the way of general training and development was not rated very highly (although as mentioned earlier, these governors were all relatively experienced).

A number of governors were convinced that they would not be able to find or afford external sources of support which matched the quality of LEA provision, although there was no evidence to suggest that any governor had actively researched the alternative market. Added to this was the anticipated burden of making and maintaining contact with outside agencies. This was a particular concern for primary and special schools, although it also worried some secondary school governors (as discussed in Chapter 2).

The main argument that governors presented was that LEAs shared the responsibility for ensuring that schools were successful. This perception, that LEAs shared a vested interest in school improvement, seemed to make governors more inclined to be trustful as well as reliant. It was summed up by one secondary school governor in this way:

> *'I think if we didn't have the LEA, we would have to buy in a team of experts – but, you see, the LEA has got the responsibility whereas these other people would not have any responsibility. And that would be the difference. You would get the advice you wanted to hear, pay them the fee and off they would go to keep another school sweet. But when the LEA comes in and sees a problem in school, they think, "Oh, we are going to be held accountable for this unless we help the school to address it." So therefore, they have to help us sort things out.'*

The interviews with governors also revealed a widespread mood of consternation about the increasing pressures and responsibilities that they faced. Many interviewees complained that the expectations being placed upon them, as non-professionals, were unrealistic and unreasonable. To compound this, speculation over the future of local education authorities, upon which they relied quite heavily, made governors even more despondent.

The following comment by a special school governor was typical, but in this case, the governor had decided to resign:

> *'I think LEAs are necessary for governors because ... to expect lay people to govern a school without that support would not work. The responsibilities over the past couple of years ... Well I can't think of any other voluntary group that has the same statutory responsibilities put upon them. I think it is completely over the top! It is the reason I have decided enough is enough! The imposition from central government is ... horrific.'*

4.6 Financial support

A number of interviewees described the paradox surrounding the process of school improvement and its impact on accommodation. Typically, as schools improved and became more popular, the pupil roll increased. This sometimes placed sudden, excessive demands on the existing accommodation. Schools in this situation sometimes perceived themselves as victims of their own success and looked to the LEA for a speedy response. Even where LEAs were able to provide some subsidiary funding, this was not always sufficient in the immediate term.

> *'Because we are a successful school with increasing numbers, we had to build an extension. I wrote to the LEA and persuaded them to provide some extra money but we are still broke as a result of that'* (primary headteacher).

> *'Because the sixth form has grown so much we needed more accommodation. The LEA has agreed to put in a new lift but we still have a deficit budget as a result of that building programme and the need for mobiles'* (secondary headteacher).

In some cases, schools felt that their ability to progress and improve was hampered by inadequate accommodation. In the case of one LEA, the funding formula was described as inequitable and designed to favour selective schools. Where requests for additional LEA funding were not successful, this was a source of confusion and frustration for school staff and governors.

> *'We are the people making the dynamo turn. We are the ones teaching the children in appalling "Dickensian" and unhygienic huts...The LEA should be finding the money to improve these things. Schools are having to seek out other sources of funding. They are bypassing the LEAs and seeking assistance from European funds. Why are schools having to do that?'*

> *'The LEA wants us to run a thriving school with a rising intake but they're not going to give us better accommodation which is badly needed. It's a bit disheartening'* (secondary governor).

The headteacher of the latter school concluded that the LEA was at fault in terms of inadequate financial forecasting and felt that the allocation of scarce additional resources was something of a lottery. This headteacher (and a number of other heads and governors in the study) held the conviction that whoever '*shouted the loudest*' or '*thumped the table the hardest*' would be more likely to gain additional resources from the LEA.

The headteacher of a primary school in the same LEA as the secondary school mentioned above, confirmed that, in her case, a '*tremendous amount of money*' had been provided by the LEA, but admitted that she had to '*fight really hard for that*'. The chair of governors also professed, with some satisfaction, that '*the head is very good at getting money out of the LEA*'.

The important considerations for LEAs were to ensure that, as far as possible, financial decisions were transparent to schools and the system for tendering bids was more widely understood. In one LEA, where officers were involved in a considerable amount of bid-writing activity to secure additional funding for schools under the New Deal initiative, teachers complained about advisers spending too much time on this activity as they perceived it as wasteful and too bureaucratic.

Elsewhere, teachers wanted more input from LEA officers in the tendering of bids as they had '*more time*' and better technical knowledge. Where LEAs did provide practical support to schools, in terms of actually putting bids together, this was appreciated by senior managers and governors. Some teachers were grateful that LEA officers had helped to influence the decisions of elected members, and secure additional funds by actively supporting the school's application.

In a small number of the schools that were visited, there was recognition that the LEA had provided important financial support by subsidising a deficit budget.

> '*The LEA has kept this school afloat. This school was not viable about 18 months ago. They allowed us to have a deficit and funded it. The LEA was hugely supportive of this school because they could see the potential. Consequently, our GCSE results this year showed a huge leap, so hopefully we have rewarded them*' (secondary governor).

As the above quotation illustrates, this type of LEA support is vital to the success of individual schools but it is unlikely to be publicised and would not, therefore, receive wider acknowledgement. This is a further example important 'low-key' LEA support, as discussed in the previous sections of this chapter.

4.7 Summary points

- Just over half the LEAs attempted to provide comprehensive curriculum support and training, whereas the remaining (smaller) LEAs concentrated their efforts on the core subjects. There was a lingering expectation in schools that LEAs ought to be offering a range of support across the entire curriculum. Due to pressures on school budgets, a school-based model of curriculum support was considered (by schools) to be a more cost-effective approach than individual attendance at centrally organised courses. However, this was not the most cost-effective option for LEAs with a large number of schools and a relatively small team of advisers. This approach also raised questions about the inherent danger of schools becoming insular establishments with fewer opportunities to share ideas with colleagues in other schools.
- The statutory requirement for LEAs to charge schools for general curriculum advice was a source of irritation to teachers. It was perceived as being unsupportive. There was a perception that, in some LEAs, subject advisers were less accessible to teachers because the focus of their work had shifted to supporting headteachers on whole-school issues. The LEA advisory teacher model had largely disappeared. Where it had been retained, schools valued the service highly. Elsewhere, teachers reported that they missed this type of provision.
- Secondary schools were more likely (than primary schools) to avail themselves of external trainers. However, issues had been raised in relation to cost and the lack of quality assurance. One of the most valued LEA contributions was the facilitation of area curriculum networks. Although advisers played a fairly minor role in terms of delivering sessions or chairing meetings, schools believed that, without LEA input, these network groups would lapse.
- Primary and special schools appreciated the wider role of LEAs in helping them to implement the National Literacy Strategy. LEAs presented the Strategy in a positive way and promoted the Government's objectives. Schools relied heavily on their LEA to help them interpret the requirements (which were felt to be presented in an over-rigid way) to reassure teachers and to raise their confidence. The considerable monitoring role (too onerous for one or two literacy consultants) had implications for LEA advisers. In most cases, however, this aspect was included as part of the general monitoring visits and gave advisers a welcome opportunity to see teachers in action.

- LEA officers believed that their approach to data collection and analysis had become more rigorous and systematic. Their view was that SMTs and governors now recognised the importance of comparative data in helping schools to improve. The publication of data created tension, however, for some schools with small pupil cohorts or pupils with identified learning difficulties.
- Some LEAs were in the process of developing a register or database of good practice in schools. Because access to schools was more limited (under the terms of the Code of Practice), LEAs relied more upon schools to self-nominate. This sometimes created issues.
- The vast majority of headteachers in the study agreed that LEA support for them (as individuals and professionals) was vital. The main issue for advisers was that although many of them appreciated the professional isolation that could be experienced by headteachers, the focused visits did not always allow for the kinds of discussions that the latter wished to engage in. What became apparent was that a good deal of underpinning support for headteachers was veiled or invisible to others.
- The overwhelming majority of governors who were interviewed believed that certain aspects of LEA support for governing bodies were essential. The types of LEA support that governors valued most highly were advice relating to personnel and financial issues and practical support in the appointment of headteachers. Governors argued that LEAs shared responsibility for ensuring that schools were successful. The perception that LEAs shared a vested interest in school improvement seemed to make governors more inclined to be trustful as well as reliant. Routine attendance at governing body meetings by LEA representatives was uncommon but where it was retained, officers believed that this involvement helped the LEA to learn about its schools in greater depth.

5. SUPPORT AND INTERVENTION FOR SCHOOLS CAUSING CONCERN

As LEA monitoring procedures become more systematic and rigorous (see Chapter 3), schools with weaknesses should, in theory, be identified and categorised by LEA officers at an early stage. Depending on the severity of the concern, schools may require a watching brief, the offer of additional support (which could be described as light-touch intervention) or, in a minority of cases, direct and robust LEA intervention.

As the Code of Practice envisages (paragraph 44) (GB. DfEE, 1999a), some governing bodies and headteachers will want the LEA to take an active role in supporting their improvement strategy, and that was the view expressed by most school interviewees in this study (as illustrated in Chapter 6). However, the Code also delivers the clear message to LEAs that this type of support should not hinder or stand in the way of school self-improvement. This suggests that LEAs have a difficult balance to achieve.

In some cases, LEA advisers were obliged to refuse a headteacher's request for assistance and to deflect responsibility (see **5.4**) yet, at the same time, maintain a strong working relationship and protect the image of a responsive service. In other cases, interviewees in schools that had required intensive LEA support to address identified weaknesses partly attributed their school's '*failure*' to a state of professional isolation. This had developed either because the LEA had earlier lost contact with its schools due to a preoccupation with income generation, or because the previous headteacher had effectively rejected LEA support. Other research suggests that one of the main characteristics of a 'failing' school is the professional isolation that comes about when schools operate as separate units (Riley and Rowles, 1997).

5.1 The trigger for intervention

The point at which LEA support (by mutual consent) becomes an intervention which is more direct and less negotiable depends on whether or not a school is willing to recognise, and be able to act upon improving, its areas of weakness.

> '*Where a school has shown that it is incapable of improving by its own efforts, or declines to acknowledge failure, the LEA must act in order to protect the interests of the pupils... Its interventions should be early and preventative, so that severe failure is avoided*' (Code of Practice, paragraph 39e).

Thus '*intervention*' is defined in the Code of Practice as action which directly engages a local education authority in making decisions about a school's conduct or operation, on matters that would normally be the responsibility of schools. As such, intervention lies at one end of a spectrum of LEA interest in, and interaction with, schools. Formal powers of intervention, as described in Part Two of the Code of Practice, therefore, are expected to be used sparingly by LEAs, and such measures should never come as a surprise to schools if effective dialogue has taken place.

These formal powers (which were introduced in the School Standards and Framework Act) are:

- the issue of a formal warning notice
- the appointment of additional governors
- the suspension of delegated powers, and
- action taken to restore pupil discipline.

Although LEA intervention (in its widest sense) is not strictly confined to schools in special measures or that have serious weaknesses, the Code does imply such a limitation by stating that if an LEA is intervening in more than 12 per cent of its schools, '*it should be asking itself some very searching questions*' (paragraph 47a).

The Code suggests that an '*effective*' LEA is one that is skilled at identifying early warning signs, and raising the issue with schools in an unconfrontational way, and this, again, emphasises the importance of appointing advisers with exceptional interpersonal skills. However, this type of intervention will only be effective if headteachers and governors, themselves, are open to advice and sufficiently competent to put things right. There was evidence to suggest in some cases, that senior managers in schools were not always listening to the LEA message. One headteacher observed that: '*Some heads are just beyond help! Even when the LEA knows the full extent of the problem.*'

Another headteacher described how the LEA had asked her to support a headteacher colleague in a local primary school causing concern during the weeks prior to its OFSTED inspection. When the school subsequently 'failed' the inspection, the supporting headteacher realised that no amount of LEA or colleague support could have helped that headteacher to make the necessary changes. He was simply not prepared to listen.

Some other interviewees talked about situations in recent years where headteachers and governors at their school had been 'in denial' about their schools' weaknesses. In such cases, LEAs had found it difficult to implement prompt and early intervention strategies. Instead, there was, what some interviewees described as, a long and drawn-out process during which all parties became increasingly frustrated. When the robust intervention was eventually applied, it came as something of a relief, but there was general condemnation by staff and governors over that approach. The two examples below illustrate this point:

'I think once a school is put into special measures, the LEA should meet with the governing body without the head being there and give it to them straight. Our problem was the head was always there at the meetings. He was the nicest, kindest, most conscientious of heads, but, looking back, clearly he should have gone immediately because of the situation the school was in. That didn't happen and the LEA didn't say to us that we should be looking at those options.

'It was only about seven or eight months later that the chair of governors went to the LEA to discuss the action plan yet again – it kept on getting thrown back as not being good enough. He got home and was phoned up and told if you do not remove the head by five o' clock today, we will take over the school! Just like that! The rug was pulled away.

'Once that dear man had gone, all the bolts were pulled out! They were here, ready to help. I can't understand why all that did not happen straightaway. Why was the head was left in post for more than six months? I think it was a lack of experience on everybody's part; playing a game but not knowing the rules' (secondary school governor).

'For some time, the LEA link adviser had been saying that things were not right but they [the LEA] *hadn't really got any "teeth" at that time. The problems were being brought to the head's attention but he was in denial and, therefore, letting the staff down.*

'The school was inspected by OFSTED and put into special measures – which came as a complete shock to the governors. Also to the staff because they didn't know what they were doing wrong. After the second HMI monitoring visit, sufficient progress had still not been made against the action plan. The [former] *head felt that he had not been well supported by the LEA; he didn't know what he needed to do and shortly after, he went off sick. Then a temporary acting head was put in and after that, the LEA support seemed much better.* [The former headteacher resigned]' (primary headteacher).

In both of these cases, the perception was that the LEA had waited too long to intervene. Neither of the headteachers above had responded to advice over a long period, and were essentially then left to flounder without LEA support until circumstances eventually reached a critical point which resulted in the LEA's desired outcome, in other words, the replacement of the headteacher. The more typical scenario, however, was that 'ineffective' headteachers read the signals and resigned from their posts shortly before or after the school was placed in special measures by OFSTED (an occurrence also reported by Scanlon, 1999).

For schools in special measures or those that have serious weaknesses, there is now a requirement placed upon LEAs to ensure that steps are being taken

to resolve the difficulties. This may, or may not, involve the use of those formal intervention powers listed above but there is a mandate for LEAs to draw up an action plan which describes the strategies and measures that will be applied. This approach should make the process more transparent, by setting time-related targets and expected outcomes. In practice, schools that have been placed in special measures often have a change of leadership either shortly before or after the inspection, and LEAs need to judge how much space and practical support a new headteacher will need.

> *'I came in after the school went into special measures and I feel if we hadn't started to turn in the right direction, the LEA would have stepped in much harder. They left me alone for a term. Obviously if I needed help they would have been there, but they left me alone to try and sort it and then they came and monitored and gave us feedback and we came out of special measures early. I think that's right, that's what they should do. They supported me while I was doing what needed doing and fed back positively to staff'* (primary headteacher).

In another LEA, a relatively inexperienced, incoming headteacher regarded the concentrated support as reassuring at first. The Director had made all officers aware that the school was to be everyone's first priority. '*Inspectors were visiting at the drop of a hat*' but the headteacher soon felt stifled by the sheer intensity of LEA intervention. The balance was redressed however, as soon as the LEA was alerted.

5.2 The allocation of resources

When schools were placed in the category of requiring additional support, this triggered additional resources, on condition that the headteacher and governing body drew up a rigorous action plan. The usual procedure was for LEA officers/advisers, headteachers and governors to first identify what funds were available from the school's own budget before a final decision was made about the use of additional resources from the Standards Fund. Recent changes to the administration of the grant (whereby schools received the devolved funding and then bought back LEA support) were perceived as irritating by some officers. A secondary headteacher was also sceptical and believed that such arrangements could complicate matters since schools which 'failed' were often those that had difficulty in managing resources effectively in the first place.

Headteachers of successful schools were generally philosophical about the prospect of some other schools requiring an injection of additional resources in order to help them improve, although there were some objections. One special school headteacher claimed that the system was inequitable because some schools worked so hard to improve, yet the resources went to '*less deserving*' cases.

Once a school had been officially removed from special measures or serious weaknesses, the cessation of LEA intervention was sometimes perceived (by the schools concerned) as abandonment. One headteacher described it this way:

> '*Now we are out of the woods there is an unwritten feeling of "Get on with it but God help you if it goes wrong!" At the moment I am flavour of the month but I am not naïve enough to think that six months down the line, if I make a genuine mistake, that... [pause]... that's the cynical side. But I do feel a bit worried that there's this feeling "Oh they're out of special measures – they're all right now!"*'

5.3 'Low-key' intervention

Interviews with LEA officers generally revealed a strong sense of professional loyalty towards headteachers. That is not to suggest that LEAs were reluctant to deal with unsatisfactory leadership. On the contrary, this was a clear priority in most EDPs and powers of intervention were universally welcomed.

> '*It is a refreshing contrast to be told that we have this duty to intervene when there are problems*' (Director of Education).

It was also a common perception that the key factor in turning a weak school around was a change in leadership. Nevertheless, there was a common belief that underperformance should be dealt with sensitively as well as swiftly. This type of LEA intervention was often handled quietly, away from the public domain. Sometimes, information about a headteacher's competence was shared only between a small group of officers and elected members. Had this information been brought to the attention of the full Education Committee, it would have become public knowledge. The descriptions below illustrate other examples of 'low-key' LEA interaction which is only recognised and appreciated by those who are directly involved:

> '*We have "moved-on" quite a number of headteachers, quietly and with dignity. If there is a problem with a head or other member of staff, it doesn't have to hit the headlines; it can be dealt with in a more subtle and sympathetic manner. That sort of quiet, "behind-the-scenes" support is substantial, for example heads who have never really recovered from their OFSTED inspection. Sometimes there is a need to go through a formal competency procedure but most teachers and headteachers are intelligent, able people who, for some reason, have lost their way. If you show them the evidence and get them to look at it carefully, they will often say "OK, how do I best get out?" And it is hard. But it happens repeatedly. It is not a sneaky way of pulling people out (and it can be seen as that); it is just getting people to accept and realise where they are and finding a dignified way out for them. It is giving them a dignified exit*' (Director of Education).

> '*In the majority of cases, there is an awful lot of "informal" intervention going on. The change has been quite dramatic. There were a large number of resignations and early retirements as a result of that*' (senior adviser).
>
> '*The LEA has helped to move people on. About eight heads have gone since the new Director came. Most of those were in denial about the fact that their schools were failing*' (senior adviser).

In another LEA, which had many small primary schools with longstanding headteachers and an authority-wide issue about the quality of leadership and management, a senior officer described how quite a few '*dinosaur heads*' had been encouraged to resign. Even though governors seemed to understand that it was their responsibility to monitor the performance of the headteacher, in practice this was left to the LEA. For example:

> '*How do I, as a* [secondary] *governor, come in and assess a headteacher? What do I do? With the previous head, there were several indicators of problems... but when you only meet once or twice a term, it is very difficult to tease out what the reality is.*'

The ultimate removal of the headteacher (by subtle or more overt methods) was not always the most appropriate form of intervention. Most officers described a range of strategies including the drafting in of successful headteachers, or LEA staff, to work alongside and support colleagues in schools causing concern. A number of LEAs used this approach to support primary headteachers, but there were doubts as to whether this strategy could be transported to the secondary sector, where the culture was perceived as more 'macho' and competitive.

Again, this type of intervention was not necessarily made known to the wider school community, in order to protect the dignity of the headteacher concerned. Where additional adviser support was provided, this was invariably at the expense of other duties. One senior officer was concerned that link advisers sometimes '*get sucked in body and soul*' but without that level of support, some schools could not remain operational. In a minority of new LEAs, officers described how they had inherited a large number of failing schools from the previous administration. The determination to address this had involved a huge investment in resources and actually dominated their workload and therefore limited the amount of contact with other, more successful schools.

> '*Other schools don't see as much of their adviser but they don't know why. So they may complain – not knowing that advisers are working flat-out* [to support a headteacher colleague]' (Director of Education).

The subtlety of the intervention could be such that it went unnoticed, even by staff working in the school. As one primary governor explained:

> '*In my view, the* [link] *adviser is actually running the school right now. She is actually managing the senior staff but nobody realises this! She is actually overseeing everything until the new head*

comes but no one else knows ... not even the other governors ... and I know for a fact that she has had to intervene to stop some of the decisions of the head before they became known.'

Interviewees observed that once a 'weak' headteacher was no longer in post, LEA support for the school became much more visible. This LEA response was judged and interpreted critically by teachers and governors who felt that the support was being provided too late.

'*It wasn't until the head had gone that the cavalry came in!*'

'*The whole culture seems to be about picking up the pieces after there's been a crash!*'

In other words, staff and governors were not always aware of the circumstances in which LEA advice and support had been offered and refused or ignored.

5.4 Intervention in the classroom

Seven of the ten LEAs had built an element of classroom observation in all schools into their regular monitoring cycle. Officers from one LEA that had not, admitted that this was because the LEA was too slim at the centre to be able to fulfil this role but they would have liked to do more observation in classrooms.

The approach of the seven LEAs is at odds with the Code's guidance, which states that classroom observation (by LEA advisers) should only be used where there are significant concerns or for the purpose of disseminating good practice. One of the LEAs that had included its intention to carry out classroom observation in its EDP was subsequently censured by the Regional Adviser and was told that it was OFSTED's role to be in classrooms.

'*We thought "My God!... You have to wait six years to check that out then?"*'

As the discussions continued, the Regional Adviser apparently relented, and approved the plan, providing that the visits were concerned with school self-evaluation, '*which, of course, they were*'.

Advisers were aware, however, that a balance needed to be struck in order to avoid a dependency culture where '*schools expect to see somebody from outside, telling them how well they are doing*'.

From the schools' point of view, headteachers and their staff did not generally perceive this type of involvement as unwelcome. Rather, it was considered to be helpful as it provided an external and objective view. The LEA role in monitoring the National Literacy Strategy had helped to confirm this perception and the introduction of supported school self-evaluation provided

a rational context. The support was particularly useful in small schools, where teaching heads reported difficulties in finding the time for classroom observation. Furthermore, it was suggested that not all headteachers had the sufficient skills or experience to fulfil this role. According to some advisers, a minority of headteachers still required '*a nudge*' to go down the capability route and whilst most headteachers were able to identify the issues, the most important function, in terms of school improvement, was using that information to move teachers forward.

> '*Sometimes ... we may need to work with the headteacher on how to feed back: to sit in on the feedback and then sit down with the teacher to establish their perception of the feedback. The skill to be developed is often about feeding back in a positive way, even if the overall message is quite negative. Also, some heads who have not taught the National Curriculum for some time feel unsure about doing the monitoring and ask for support*' (Chief Inspector).

Where there were concerns about the quality of teaching, it was fairly common for headteachers to ask LEA link or subject advisers to observe the teaching in order to triangulate their own views.

5.5 Formal intervention

In new LEAs, or where there had been a recent change of Director, schools were likely to have received an expeditious reminder of the zero tolerance agenda. An early act of robust LEA intervention thus sent out a clear and important message to all schools, and this type of action was generally applauded by staff in other schools who held the view that such intervention was overdue.

Where intervention was designed to be a supportive rather than a punitive act, this was seen to be more effective. One teacher who had worked in a special school throughout the period of special measures believed that the rate of improvement depended heavily upon the quality of relationships between the school and the advisers. Some advisers realised that the teachers were not lazy or incompetent; rather that they had been working very hard, but in the wrong direction, due to a lack of guidance and support. Advisers with this attitude made the staff feel valued again. Elsewhere, a headteacher who had been appointed to a primary school already in special measures, described how LEA intervention had been a positive experience and had helped to restore morale amongst the teaching staff:

> '*Teacher morale was low but they* [LEA advisers] *helped to boost it. They came in on a friendly basis as advisers rather than inspectors. They didn't criticise – they just wanted to help. They offered practical advice and suggestions. You need someone who will listen and work with the class teachers, because they [the teachers] are the only ones who can effect the change that's needed.*

Teachers need to have their confidence built back up so above all you need people who are good at building effective working relationships. People get frightened when their school goes into special measures. They feel that they've been told they're useless and that they lack ability – no matter how good they really are. They have all been damned, so they are frightened of everything. They need a kick-start – and ideas to get them moving again.'

In a different LEA, the Director sent out a supportive and non-threatening letter to all schools that had received a critical OFSTED report placing them in special measures or designating them as having serious weaknesses. The style and language that was adopted served to reassure schools and reinforce the LEA's stated objective of a shared partnership approach:

'We are writing to assure you of our full support for the school community at this time...

'... we are confident that, with the dedication and commitment of you and your team and the advice and support from the department, ... the areas of weakness will be tackled swiftly...'

A number of interviewees spoke about a culture of blame that could easily damage working relationships following a critical inspection report. Unless all parties were willing to accept at least some responsibility for the issues that had been identified, progress was likely to be hampered. According to one adviser, headteachers and governors tended to blame the LEA for shortcomings whereas teachers were more likely to blame the senior management team in the school. This is illustrated below:

'I think there was a tendency to wait for OFSTED to solve the problem. I don't accept that nobody had an idea about what was wrong because certainly there were inspectors working in the school – trying to get the previous head on track' (governor).

'When we had the inspection and things went pear-shaped, the staff felt very angry because they felt it wasn't their fault. It was the management and organisation and the staff were not happy with the previous head. There was a lot of frustration over that. It spread a lot of bitterness and people were reluctant to help out by taking on responsibility for the action plan and things like that' (teacher).

Examples were given which illustrated how LEAs sometimes effectively took the responsibility for failure simply because officers were not at liberty to discuss or disclose publicly the full details of a case. At the time of the research, a group of angry parents in one of the LEAs was demanding to know why the LEA had 'sacked' a local headteacher. Full details of the

circumstances were kept confidential in order to protect both the individual and the school community.

The time lapse between the verbal disclosure of an OFSTED team's findings and their subsequent publication allowed LEAs the time to assist governors in the writing of a press release, to prepare for potential media interest, and to defend the school from the public glare. As these officers explained:

> '*It is all taken care of. We have officers like* [name] *who is a real Trojan. He will just stand in front of cameras and ... just take it! To protect the schools.*'

> '*Last week, with the latest school to go into special measures,* [the link adviser] *said to the head "If you want a parents' meeting, I will come along to run the meeting and tell the parents what we are planning to do." We do that without thought. And the lead officer would be there too.*'

In this way, LEA officers were prepared to jeopardise their own professional stance in order to shield and take the pressure off schools, because this then allowed schools to get on with the business of improvement. Examples such as this reinforce the view that, because LEAs have a vested interest in the progress and achievement of schools, their contribution is crucial, if not always appreciated. The counter argument is that ineffective LEA support or a reluctance to intervene may have contributed to a school's underperformance in the first place. Some staff in the schools that had been placed in special measures or that were designated as having serious weaknesses noted (with some contempt) the stark contrast between levels of LEA support before and after OFSTED reported its findings. However, as already suggested;

- even where LEA intervention does take place over a period of time, this is not always recognised by those people who are not directly concerned
- not all schools are receptive to LEA support and deny there is a problem
- some LEAs were so heavily involved in earnings-related activity (such as OFSTED contracted work) that they lost contact with their own schools.

There was also evidence to suggest that LEA intervention could, if approached insensitively, further demoralise staff and hinder the process of school improvement. What teachers and governors said they resented the most was when the LEA apportioned all blame to the school and made them feel like '*naughty children*' for having '*got themselves into a mess*'.

> ' *I felt that every time we did anything, we were criticised. The goalposts kept getting move... and we just faced a tirade of criticism*'

'The people who came in with the "critical" head on, just made us feel rather stupid and ignorant.'

'The first meeting we had with them [the LEA] *was handled quite badly – sort of saying "Now it is time to get your fingers out and start working or lose your jobs!" That wasn't what we wanted to hear – we wanted support.'*

The issue of a formal warning

Where an LEA has grave concerns about a school and concludes that one of more of the following characteristics apply, then the LEA may issue a formal warning to the governing body:

- unacceptably low standards are unlikely to improve unless the LEA appoints additional governors and/or suspends the school's delegated budget
- there has been a breakdown in the way a school is managed or governed and this prejudices pupils' standards of performance, or
- the safety of pupils or staff is threatened by a breakdown of discipline or for some other reason.

The formal warning should specify a 'compliance period', of not usually less than one month, in order for the school to remedy the concern with corrective action. If the governing body does not comply, then sections 16 and 17 of the School Standards and Framework Act allow LEAs to either appoint additional governors and/or suspend the school's delegated powers.

From the responses of the interviewees, it would appear that this order of events was not always adhered to. Some LEAs, for example, claimed not to have issued formal warnings, even though they had appointed additional governors. One governing body resigned '*en masse*' as a form of protest because a major decision had been made by the LEA without its knowledge. One officer, in an LEA that had appointed additional governors, described the formal warning mechanism as a '*complete nonsense*' because the timescale was too drawn out.

The appointment of additional governors

All but one of the ten LEAs had appointed additional governors and judged this to be a very useful and highly effective strategy. The only LEA that had not used this formal power of intervention was one with very few schools in special measures. Some officers gave examples of how this approach had proved successful in helping to '*dislodge*' or '*outvote*' obstructive or unenlightened governors in order to move the school forward. In one LEA, additional governors were appointed routinely in all schools placed in special measures. In three other LEAs, this measure had been taken on a number of occasions.

Finding suitable and appropriately skilled and experienced people to take on the role of an additional governor, however, was not a straightforward matter. It was important to enlist governors who could offer a combination of experience and sensitivity. Another factor was finding people who were able to devote the necessary time. In some cases, recruits were sought and found from within the LEA.

'Councillors were excellent in rallying around to help.'

'Everyone in the governor support team here is an additional governor, as well as being a governor at a school of their choice.'

In other LEAs, officers observed that this approach could create tensions if governing bodies perceived that they were being infiltrated by an LEA '*spy*'. The preferred strategy, therefore, was to enlist the help of '*effective*' or '*good*' governors from other schools. This intention in itself caused a dilemma because there was no objective measure for evaluating individual governor effectiveness and few LEAs had routine access to governing body meetings. As one governor support officer pointed out:

'What constitutes a "good" governor? You have to be careful how you select the people – there is an issue there about equal opportunities.'

This approach could also cause tensions when negotiating with donor governing bodies. One LEA, which had unwittingly inconvenienced a donor governing body, acknowledged the issue by inviting that particular group of governors to help write a set of protocols. The projected outcome would be a kind of 'intervention handbook' for all schools.

Despite these reservations, it was clear that most LEAs were beginning to think ahead, rather than trawl around for additional governors at the last minute. To this end, there were a number of references about plans to compile a register of potential additional governors, who could be matched with and appointed to schools if necessary. In one LEA, the governor support officer had considered inviting retired headteachers to put their names forward. His perception was that there were many retired heads who felt loyal to the LEA and who might be keen to contribute.

Suspension of delegated powers

Six of the ten LEAs in the study had found it necessary to suspend a school's delegated powers, in a very few cases. Where this measure had been used, it was described as a useful short-term strategy which enabled governors to concentrate all their efforts on the process of school improvement.

5.6 Summary points

- Intervention lies at one end of a spectrum of LEA interest in, and interaction with, schools. The Code suggests that an effective LEA is one that is skilled at identifying early warning signs and raising the issue with schools in an unconfrontational way. However, early intervention by LEAs may only be effective if schools are willing to recognise their weaknesses and have the capacity to respond to advice. The majority of LEAs had built in an element of classroom observation into their regular monitoring cycle, although this is at odds with the guidance in the Code.

- There was a common perception that the key factor in turning a weak school around was a change in leadership. LEAs believed that this should be dealt was sensitively as well as swiftly. This type of LEA intervention was often handled quietly, away from the public domain. A range of other strategies was used by LEAs to support headteachers in schools causing concern but again, this type of 'low-key' support was not necessarily made known to the wider community. The subtlety of the intervention could be such that it went unnoticed, even by staff working in the school.

- Formal intervention was perceived to be more effective (by schools) when designed to be a supportive, rather than punitive act. In order for the school to improve, the confidence and morale of staff often needed to be restored and this was a key role for LEA advisers and officers. It emerged that some officers were prepared to jeopardise their own professional standing in order to defend school staff and governors from adverse publicity.

- The appointment of additional governors was perceived to be highly effective in helping some schools improve. However, finding suitable and appropriately skilled people to take on this role was not always a straightforward matter. The suspension of delegated powers was used sparingly.

6. EVALUATING THE LEA CONTRIBUTION

The report thus far has examined a number of different aspects of the revised LEA role and described how these were embraced and implemented in the ten case study LEAs. This chapter explores the *evaluation* by different stakeholders of the LEA contribution to school improvement. It considers the impact of the processes and relationships that have been described in terms of measurable output and asks and answers two key questions:

- **Do LEAs actually make a difference?**

and, if so,

- **What is the evidence to support this?**

The message coming out from LEA inspections to date suggests that LEAs do have a strategic role to play in school improvement, but is it possible to disentangle the LEA contribution from those of the headteacher, staff and governing body and attribute reliable, causal links?

In order to obtain a range of perspectives, interviewees in schools and LEAs were asked for their views in relation to the questions posed above. Their responses are described and analysed below.

6.1 The school perspective

A major finding of this study was that 81 per cent of the headteachers, teachers and governors interviewed in depth believed that schools (in general, if not in total) needed LEAs in order to help them to improve. The responses of the 100 interviewees in the 28 schools that were visited are summarised in the table overleaf:

Table 6.1 School staff and governors' perceptions about the need for LEAs (in order to help schools improve)

Do schools need LEAs to help them improve?	Yes – without doubt	Yes – probably not all	Some schools do but either way	Not sure	No	Total
Primary heads	9	2	1	1	0	**13**
Secondary heads	2	3	3	2	0	**10**
Special heads	3	1	0	1	0	**5**
Secondary deputies	2	2	1	2	2	**9**
Primary literacy coordinators	7	2	0	1	1	**11**
Special literacy coordinators	4	0	0	1	0	**5**
Secondary HoDs	4	5	2	5	2	**18**
Other teachers	2	1	0	0	0	**3**
Primary governors	10	1	0	0	0	**11**
Secondary governors	7	1	1	1	0	**10**
Special governors	4	1	0	0	0	**5**
Totals	**54**	**19**	**8**	**14**	**5**	**100**

Analysis

Just over half of all interviewees (across all categories of status and phase) expressed a strong conviction that **all** schools needed the support of LEAs in order to help them to improve. Although the numbers in each category were small, this view was expressed by the majority of:

- primary headteachers
- special school headteachers
- primary literacy coordinators
- special school literacy coordinators
- chairs of governors in all phases.

As part of their response, a number of these interviewees went on to speculate about the future of LEAs and expressed strong views about the prospect of school self-sufficiency. For example:

> '*I think the theory that schools and governors want to be fully independent is a myth that politicians have invented*' (primary governor).

> '*I passionately believe in the future of LEAs and I feel very sad that I can see the infrastructure being scaled down. I think you need somebody out there, thinking on the big scale while we concern ourselves with the intense but-small scale-work*' (primary literacy coordinator).

The misplaced headings in Table 6.1 on page 98 have been corrected on this **erratum** slip.

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Secondary HoDs	4	5	2	5	2	**18**
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Primary governors	10	1	0	0	0	**11**
Secondary governors	7	1	1	1	0	**10**
Special governors	4	1	0	0	0	**5**
Totals	**54**	**19**	**8**	**14**	**5**	**100**

Other interviewees, who gave a positive but conditional response (27 per cent), typically considered the wider needs of colleagues in their replies and concluded that schools, as a whole, needed LEAs to help them improve, even though not *all* schools (individually) needed LEAs at *all* times.

These respondents tended to be:

- heads of department in secondary schools, who did not necessarily benefit from LEA support directly but who acknowledged that LEA support was valuable at SMT level
- secondary headteachers who recognised the needs of smaller primary schools and those schools with a more difficult intake of pupils, or
- interviewees who believed the judgement depended largely on the quality of LEA personnel.

Some interviewees argued that the LEA contribution (in general) was important, despite the fact that their own recent experiences of LEA support had been less than favourable. In one particular LEA, for example, where a small team of advisers and officers at the centre was attempting to meet the needs of a large number of schools across a wide geographical area, interviewees were generally resigned to the fact that the LEA was necessarily operating under a crisis management model. One headteacher gave this response:

> '*Ideally, yes and LEAs would be well enough resourced to provide the support that schools need. I believe that we should be publicly run by, and accountable to them. Unfortunately, what is happening in my view, and in our area, is that the LEA is so under-resourced that it is questionable whether it can actually do the job it intended to do. I am now beginning to think we might just as well be by ourselves. Which is sad in my view. I don't think that's how it should be.*'

Fourteen interviewees were unconvinced about the need for LEAs in school improvement. The main consideration here was whether or not the grant-maintained (GM) model of self-sufficient schools could, in practice, be applied more widely. A number of teachers made reference to the fact that since many GM schools were perceived as successful, this was a model that could not easily be dismissed. Upon further reflection, there were comments such as:

> '*Some GM schools managed without [LEAs] but perhaps they had better motivated kids?*' (deputy head, EBD school).

> '*Even if, in an ideal world, all schools had that kind of money to buy in expertise from wherever, who would be providing it? The same people who now make up the LEA! They would go over to private consultancy and probably make more money*' (secondary governor).

> *'If the LEA weren't there, I would still need someone who would be able to provide that support. Being a headteacher is an incredibly lonely job and I don't think it is a failing in me; I don't think any one person can actually have all the answers. There are many, many times where I have had to reflect on a problem and have welcomed the opportunity to share it with someone in a position of knowledge, authority and access to resources. Often, it is not appropriate to talk about things with a fellow head, although there is a place for that too sometimes. But that fellow head may also have his eye on some of my kids!'* (secondary headteacher).

Only five per cent of all interviewees declared that schools (in general) did not need LEAs in order to help them improve. This group of five respondents included two secondary deputy headteachers. Three respondents worked in former GM secondary schools and two interviewees had recently experienced a period of special measures. As mentioned in Chapter 5, the experience of LEA intervention for schools in difficulty can, if not handled with sensitivity, leave teachers with the perception that its contribution was less than supportive.

The main reasons for their responses were:

- there is sufficient direction and monitoring of schools from central government
- there is an adequate supply of private agencies and companies to fulfil the role
- LEAs create a dependency culture which is ineffective for school improvement
- LEAs are placing too much pressure on schools.

Interestingly, no headteacher or governor (including those in the two former grant-maintained schools) agreed with the above view. The headteacher and chair of governors in one former grant-maintained school (which had, before that, held independent status) described how their school had since discovered the benefits of LEA support and challenge:

> *'I think they* [the LEA] *provide an invaluable service in that they are able to bring a range of experience that a single school doesn't have by itself. We probably appreciate it more because we never had it before – and when you see the range of opportunities... It makes you realise that, although you thought you had everything rosy, perhaps you hadn't?'*

The headteacher and governor from the other former GM school both acknowledged that, while their school had improved without the input of the LEA, there remained the need for LEA involvement in other schools, and particularly those in the primary phase.

What schools value most

As previously reported, 81 out of 100 interviewees in schools, believed that LEAs played an important role in relation to school improvement. Interviewees were asked to explain and support their views during follow-up questions. They were asked to evaluate the most important contribution that LEAs made to school improvement and to assess other relative contributions. These grounded perceptions are recorded below, under a series of broad headings. They are presented in order, starting with the most frequently expressed views.

- **LEAs impact on school improvement indirectly, because they provide the range of practical and professional support that enables schools to function efficiently and therefore focus on raising standards.**

The concept of the LEA providing the essential 'building blocks' for school improvement, was the perception most commonly expressed by governors and headteachers across all phases. When considering the most significant ways in which LEAs helped schools to improve, it was this underpinning support that school interviewees referred to rather than the direct monitoring and challenging involvement of the link adviser. Without this foundation, it was envisaged (by headteachers and governors themselves) that schools would find themselves less able to move forward developmentally, because SMT efforts would, necessarily, need to be refocused on more mundane and operational functions. This aspect of LEA support was deemed necessary because there was insufficient expertise in schools, there was insufficient time or resources to address the needs, or there was no other available source of support. The full extent of this LEA contribution was not always made explicit or laid down in policy and there was evidence that LEA staff tried hard to respond flexibly to schools in order to help resolve difficulties.

In the primary schools, the most frequently mentioned aspect was support with finance and budget management. For example:

> *'I have got 32.5 hours' secretarial help. I employed someone who could type, look after a child with a cut knee, calm down angry parents and deal with the dinner money! Now, she has had to become virtually an accountant! Were it not for the fact that we can pick up the phone and have* [the LEA] *talk us through it, we wouldn't cope'* (primary headteacher).

Across all phases, LEA support relating to personnel management was considered an important factor. The nature and value of this support has been discussed in Chapter 4, which examined specific support for governors and headteachers. In the context of the overall support provided by the LEA, the most frequently mentioned aspects were support for headteacher recruitment and selection, and issues relating to employment law.

Amongst secondary school staff and governors, it was LEA support in terms of ensuring adequate resources and support with building programmes that was most frequently rated as being highly significant. Interviewees across all phases however, described how additional resources from the LEA could make a considerable difference to teaching and learning.

> '*A well-resourced school is more likely to improve, boost morale and attract more highly qualified teachers*' (secondary head of department).

A supportive and flexible response was particularly important for special schools, where needs could fluctuate significantly, depending on the flow of pupil intake.

Potentially, this type of LEA input was perceived to have a '*dramatic impact on learning*'. In practice, however, a number of interviewees were disillusioned about the ability of the LEA to fulfil this expectation. Some schools felt that they had become victims of their own success when pupil numbers outgrew existing accommodation (see Chapter 4). Others voiced frustration at having their school's progress hampered by (what was interpreted as) an inequitable allocation of resources at either national or local levels.

> '*Buildings are massively important, in terms of impacting on pupil performance. The irony of it is that if you go to visit a successful company, they have impressive offices yet politicians are quite happy for children to be put in a hut and told "do better in English". It's a nonsense!*' (secondary headteacher)

Direct personal and professional support for headteachers and governors was generally appreciated and valued. Several interviewees (in both groups) claimed that they would not be able to 'cope' or perform their role as effectively without ongoing support and advice from their LEAs: '*Who else is there to support headteachers?*' Primary and special school headteachers were generally in agreement that they would not wish to find themselves outside of that 'supportive environment'.

LEA support for governors was considered (by almost all interviewees) to be crucially important. Several governors described LEA support in terms of the security it afforded them by using the simile of a '*comfort*' or '*security blanket*' to illustrate the relationship. One governor of a special school admitted that she would feel '*unsafe*' without the back-up of the LEA. Another, primary governor anticipated a '*mass exodus*' of governors nationally if LEA support were ever to be withdrawn.

Interviews with classroom and subject teachers revealed that they had infrequent contact with LEA staff (largely attributed to the downsizing of LEA teams, making subject advisers less visible in the classrooms, as well as the impact of Fair Funding and the Code of Practice on LEA–School Relations). However, there were indications that the type of personal and professional support available to headteachers and governors would also be appreciated at this level. Not all heads of department, for example, felt that their senior managers understood the curriculum demands that were

imposed on them and would have liked external support to reinforce their stance on certain issues. A number of primary school literacy coordinators, having felt under pressure to implement the National Literacy Strategy, reasoned that the LEA should have offered them more in the way of moral support and provided them with a 'pat on the back' every so often. Although teachers accepted that LEAs were charged with implementing a national agenda (see Chapter 2), they wanted a public gesture of understanding and support.

> *'We need to be told [by the LEA] that we are doing things well some of the time. It can be difficult when all you are hearing is how bad and lazy teachers are from the Government and from the press.'*

This aspect of the LEA role was also recognised by some governors:

> *'People aren't valued enough and I think that this is a very important role of the LEA.'*

- **In order to improve, schools need to be part of a wider association, otherwise they can too easily become isolated and ossified.**

Almost a third of all interviewees believed that school improvement would be more difficult to achieve and sustain if it were not for LEAs, because of the dangers associated with isolation. As one primary headteacher put it:

> *'A school in isolation is potentially a weak school.'*

The main reason for this perception was the belief that schools could easily become out of touch with good practice and latest developments. One theory put forward by some interviewees was that because their LEA had focused much of its efforts on OFSTED contracts in recent years, schools had became too distanced and isolated from their LEA and subsequently, a number of them found themselves placed under special measures. According to these interviewees, this represented a salutary lesson that central government needed to consider. Moreover, the risk to high-achieving schools was considered to be equally significant. One primary headteacher warned that without LEA support and regular involvement, successful schools (like her own) could easily *'slip into cruise mode'*. In another LEA, a secondary head had witnessed a situation where, in the past, a successful school had eventually stagnated because *'it not been asking enough questions of itself'*.

One primary school teacher who had worked overseas described the problems of isolation this way:

> *'You need somebody who can offer a view that is not just your school's. I've worked in schools like that and what happens is they go off on their own tangent of development. They may not be necessarily wrong but... they don't fit with anyone else. They have a very narrow view.'*

It was suggested that unless LEAs were able to offer relevant and well-informed advice to secondary teachers, most secondary schools looked to their own senior staff to provide generic in-service training. Some heads of department recognised a danger with this approach:

> '*I think schools are isolated enough as it is and teachers can be quite narrow-minded about their own institution.*'

> '*I think it good to belong to a corporate body and I don't mean just within a school – we are all part of an educational system. To be saying I want to take myself out of that structure and operate alone would suggest a certain arrogance and also a naivety. You know... "I don't need anybody else!"*'

In the vast majority of cases, teachers recognised the value of a two-way exchange with colleagues from other schools and the LEA was perceived to be a useful conduit for this activity. The presence of the LEA was perceived to help foster a sense of belonging that encouraged greater cohesion and networking between schools. Although former GM schools reported alternative alliances, one disadvantage was that these networks typically linked similar schools together and therefore served a narrower fraternity than the more '*comprehensive*' LEA clusters or families of schools. One secondary headteacher, for example, described the '*elitist*' culture of some networks that had developed since the introduction of '*specialist*' curriculum schools. Another drawback was that loose federations often disbanded because there was no one with overall responsibility for maintaining them. The strategic overview that LEAs held was important because it provided a shared vision and direction to which all schools could aspire.

■ LEAs help to raise standards because they develop and maintain an essential overview

Allied to the above consideration was the view that LEAs were better placed than OFSTED to help schools improve because they were able to maintain a more regular overview of schools, and because they had a local knowledge which set schools in context.

> '*Whilst we have to accept that OFSTED is here to stay, I would take the word of my inspector much more seriously because he knows the background, he knows the history, he is able to put it into context. You do need somebody who has that full picture but who is distant enough to be objective*' (secondary head of department).

Although a small minority of interviewees questioned the need for LEAs to perform a monitoring role when there was a centrally organised programme from OFSTED, 14 teachers and governors suggested that this overview of standards within a local context was a major contribution to school improvement.

Another important element was the fact that LEAs were seen to have a shared interest in the achievements of schools (see also Chapter 4). Because judgements about the effectiveness of LEAs were largely dependent on the performance of schools, governors, in particular, felt that this made LEA advice and support more reliable and genuine. Furthermore, LEA-wide policies could help to ensure that fair and correct procedures are adhered to by all schools.

Also, by maintaining an LEA-wide overview of the authority's strengths and weaknesses, resources and efforts could be effectively channelled to meet those wider needs. For example, problems with teacher (or governor) recruitment could be identified and tackled on the wider scale and benefit all schools.

■ Teachers need LEAs to help them develop their skills and expertise

This was the most important LEA contribution, according to a number of primary literacy coordinators (who had recently benefited from LEA support and advice in relation to the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy), as well as primary school governors and secondary school heads of department. Overall, this was not put forward as a significant contribution by headteachers or by staff and governors in the special school sector (who frequently reported insufficient expertise in relation to SEN amongst LEA advisers).

Although the study found that secondary teachers were becoming less likely to attend LEA-organised courses (which were, in some areas, limited or increasingly focused on national initiatives), there was still a recognition that LEAs could make a useful contribution to school improvement by working alongside teachers in the classroom. Some experienced secondary teachers reminisced about the nature of support that had formerly been available from subject advisers. In most LEAs, however, this type of activity was now minimal. One LEA, however, had retained a large team of seconded advisory subject teachers and this support was valued highly by schools:

> '*It* [the advisory teacher service] *is phenomenal really. To be able to tap in to an advisory system and know that someone with hands-on experience, recently released from the classroom, can come in and work alongside you as a supportive friend .... And there is no doubt it helps your own professional development as well – gives you opportunities to expand your own knowledge*' (deputy headteacher).

How schools evaluate the impact of the LEA contribution

Although the majority of teachers and governors in this study confirmed the perception that LEAs had a central role to play in the process of school improvement, the impact of the LEA's contribution on the raising of standards (and on the quality of teaching and learning) was mainly described as '*indirect*'. When interviewees were subsequently asked whether it was possible to assess the extent to which the LEA's particular involvement had impacted on standards in their schools, it proved more difficult for them to substantiate. As one secondary headteacher explained below:

> '*It is all so inextricably linked, isn't it? Because there is a high-quality relationship, a close relationship, between the school and the LEA, it is difficult then to try and say "This is where they have been effective and this is where we have been effective." I don't think I could disentangle those contributions – I don't think there should be a need to. I am being tasked trying to respond to the question...* [long pause]... *I don't think there is a need to and I don't think you can do it.*'

This question also posed a dilemma for other interviewees:

> '*To quantify it would be difficult. I think the LEA has made a considerable difference to the progress of the school ...because we see ourselves in partnership with the LEA. I think they do make a considerable difference but it is very hard to quantify*' (primary headteacher).

> '*My link adviser is the sort of person that you feed off of and she says something and then you suddenly find you have started on a journey. So I have a great admiration for her. And I think it has been this indirect influence which has contributed most but you can't measure it can you?*' (primary headteacher).

The following section reinforces the view that the relative contributions (to school improvement) are not easy to identify and assess.

6.2 The LEA perspective

This section explores how the LEA officers who were involved in the study perceived and evaluated their overall effectiveness in terms of helping schools to improve. Interviewees were asked how their LEA intended to analyse and evaluate its own contribution to school improvement. Their responses related largely to the processes of service delivery and the range of checks and balances for monitoring quality assurance and customer satisfaction. For those that had yet to be inspected, important lessons had been learned from the OFSTED experiences of other LEAs, and the development of EDPs had helped officers to focus more sharply on their

priorities (see Chapter 2). However, as a number of interviewees observed, the identification of quantifiable success criteria (in the EDP) had presented them with something of a challenge. This is significant because it highlights further the issue of isolating and measuring the relative contributions to school improvement (as suggested in the previous section).

Methods of self-review and other forms of external evaluation

The OFSTED programme of LEA inspections, together with the introduction of the Best Value framework, underlined the requirement for local education authorities to review the quality of their services and to consider ways of ensuring value for money. Officers across the ten LEAs described a number of strategies that had been used to help with the process of self-review. These are listed below:

- full external evaluation (conducted by a local universities) in which every school was surveyed
- taking part in the Best Value pilot
- using the DTI/DfEE model 'Competitiveness through Partnerships with People'
- commissioning surveys to be conducted by the District Audit Commission
- sending out questionnaires to schools
- implementing a rolling programme of service reviews
- setting up EDP monitoring groups/strategic reference groups.

The process of critical self-review and the analysis of evaluation exercises were described by senior officers as '*enlightening*' and '*very revealing*'. Feedback from schools, on the perceived quality of LEA services, was particularly valuable in helping LEAs to provide a framework in the light of Fair Funding and to prepare for OFSTED inspection. The areas of priority and the identified action relating to school improvement strategies and projects, as outlined in the Education Development Plans, provided a focus for monitoring. A number of interviewees described how specific reference groups had been set up to challenge the LEA on the progress made against these. Elsewhere, reports were submitted to the Executive on a regular basis. In the case of one LEA, this was repeated every three weeks even though it had considerable staffing implications.

Assessing the impact of LEA support and intervention

Although it was a relatively straightforward matter for interviewees to detail aspects of LEA activity in relation to school improvement and to describe the monitoring systems they used, it was much more difficult for interviewees to evaluate how this range of activity actually impacted on school performance.

The implementation of the National Literacy Strategy had helped some interviewees to consider ways of analysing (with schools) the impact of their interactions. For example:

> *'I think, as an LEA, we must mirror the kind of conversations we have had recently with our intensive support schools. We asked them about the impact of the strategy and, when they identified improvement, we asked them to consider what it was that led to those improvements.'*

This comment also illustrates the popular view that it was easier for LEAs to demonstrate the effectiveness of their contribution in relation to schools that were experiencing difficulties, rather than when they added value to light-touch schools that were already deemed to be successful.

> *'I think that those schools that have been deep in the mire – those in special measures etc. particularly – have nothing but praise for the LEA. When schools have gone over the abyss in that way, they are able to be more generous in their perceptions. Because that is where the LEA makes a very big difference!'* (senior inspector).

The impact of LEA intervention and support for schools with identified serious weaknesses or those which had been placed in special measures was often quoted by LEA officers as an example of a success criterion because the subsequent movement (of schools) out of these categories represented a tangible and measurable outcome. As one Director explained:

> *'I know that the schools that have come out of special measures has been down to us by a) changing the leadership of the school; b) strengthening the governing body; and c) strengthening the quality of teaching and teachers. I know that the LEA's contribution has made a difference.'*

However, in another case, the LEA's contribution was perceived to be only part of the solution:

> *'Where there are schools with serious weaknesses or in special measures and they come out, the LEA must be able to take some credit for that ... But it's not a competition... If the schools are doing better, then I am very pleased about that and I would like to think that it is principally the schools that do it and that we have supported them in the process...and that's the only credit that an LEA would want.'*

Overall, LEA interviewees needed to think hard to identify success criteria. Some officers referred to levels of buy-back by schools into LEA services. This was described by some as the 'acid test': *'If people are willing to purchase something in a free market situation, surely it means they value it?'* However, as previously suggested in Chapter 2, there may have been other reasons why many schools opted to continue purchasing LEA services

in the first year of implementation and the immediate response to Fair Funding may not necessarily be sustained in future years.

One new LEA had amassed '*quite a lot of evidence*' which had been collected by a subject inspector who had set out to analyse the impact of his work with a sample of schools. This exercise had suggested that the schools he had worked with had made more significant advances in their results than schools he hadn't worked with. However, some reservations were acknowledged because of the variation in cohorts and the fact that results needed to be compared over a longer period of time. Another LEA was, at the time of the research, putting together a study with a sample of schools to see how and why standards had risen.

It was generally accepted that there was a considerable reliance on schools to recognise and appreciate the LEA contribution to their ongoing improvement and much depended on the quality of relationships between the LEA and its schools. However, as previously illustrated although the majority of school staff in this study agreed that LEAs played an important role in helping schools to improve, the issue of measuring the impact of the LEA contribution by means of objective evidence was not clear-cut. Some schools held expectations about the LEA role that were '*at odds*' with national expectations. Additionally, advisers often referred to their input in terms of helping to create a particular ethos or culture in schools or making suggestions for development and change. Whilst schools were encouraged to take ownership of these developments, it was accepted that the initial input from the LEA could easily be overlooked. One Director gave this analogy:

> '*Very often what we are doing is laying the foundations so it is easily forgotten, I suppose. It is only when someone starts digging around and asking how was this house built then that you might get to look at the foundations again. But the poor old site workers who clear the ground never get the credit!*'

Another Director agreed:

> '*I think schools are quick to recognise the impact when they are in trouble but at the end of the day, ours is a catalyst role.*'

This dependence on schools' judgements was presented as a source of concern for some senior officers when they spoke about their perceptions of the OFSTED process. There was an anxiety that if LEAs challenged schools too hard, it might antagonise staff and governors and, in turn, '*they will rubbish us*'. If the balance was tipped too far in favour of support, schools may give the LEA 'a better press' but OFSTED would be likely to criticise them for failing to tackle the issues.

The main difficulties (as perceived by LEA officers) in terms of evaluating the impact of their contribution on standards in schools are:

- If partnerships are working well, it is difficult to disentangle the different contributions that the various parties make.

  '*If have a genuine partnership then it is very difficult to disentangle each partner's contribution. Yet this is what we are trying to achieve! It is the aim and objective – for everybody to contribute to success... to fully play their part ... and if they do that, where are the seams? Where are the joins? There shouldn't be any. You are striving not to have any yet you are supposed to quantify each partner's contribution. It is going round in circles. And schools will always be keen to claim their own success*' (Director).

- There are so many direct and indirect influences on schools, it seems illogical to try to separate out their relative impact. For example, as one senior inspector observed:

  '*The quality of what goes on in schools is influenced by all sorts of things ... DfEE initiatives, OFSTED... so why shouldn't it be influenced by the LEA? Why are those other things more significant? Where is the evidence that GM schools raised standards? Recent research shows that the reason they were at the top of the league tables was that they were almost always selective. Where is the evidence that buying in from consultants is more effective than LEA advice... ?*'

- The apparent focus on measurable output (as opposed to outcomes) is unrealistic, given the circumstances. One Director described it this way:

  '*If the process is good, then one would assume it contributes something to the output. The outcomes of a good LEA, it seems to me, are about relationships, partnership working and about facilitating a good process. If that is all good then it is likely you are working well together and that may well affect the outputs... in this case standards of achievement. I know it is just language but there is an important distinction.*'

- Some interviewees suggested that, generally speaking, the LEA's involvement was analysed only when things had gone wrong. One senior officer's perception was, for example, that it was difficult to work in a culture '*which comes from central government*' and which attributes a school's success to the staff and governors, but where a school is doing badly, it is because the LEA '*hasn't done anything about it.*' There was also a perception that schools interpreted things in a similar vein, in other words, if things were running smoothly then schools were happy to take the credit whereas if circumstances changed, the LEA was inevitably blamed.

The general consensus was that schools which were genuinely reflective in their practice would be able to identify the LEA contribution. Whether

they would be able to evaluate its impact was another question. The research evidence suggests that schools and LEA officers were challenged when it came to measuring and evaluating the impact of the LEA contribution on standards in schools. The huge distance between an LEA and the learning experiences of an individual pupil inevitably makes it difficult to impact in any direct sense. Until LEAs manage to develop a range of creative and robust methods of assessing the impact of their involvement with schools in general and engage schools in the process of joint analysis, it is likely that their contribution will be measured against the progress of those in most difficulty:

> '*When everything crumbles, that is when I feel the most direct ability to influence. Unfortunately it is when there is trouble – it is not a kind of proactive thing – it is when it has hit the fan!*' (Director).

6.3 OFSTED evaluation

Further evaluation of the role of the LEA and its contribution to school improvement has been provided by OFSTED. Under the powers conferred on Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in section 38 of the Education Act 1997 (GB. Statutes, 1997), a national programme of LEA inspections was implemented in January 1998, following a series of pilot inspections of nine authorities.

LEA inspections are conducted in conjunction with the Audit Commission under the terms of reference laid down in the revised framework *LEA Support for School Improvement* (OFSTED, 1999). Although the remit of the inspection framework covers a review of the way in which LEAs perform '*any function ... which relates to the provision of education...*', the principal focus is on support for school improvement. It is planned that all 150 local education authorities will be inspected by September 2001.

Initial reactions to the framework highlighted a number of concerns. Some senior LEA officers, for example, expressed worries in a letter to OFSTED about the planned inspection programme, speculating that the system would be insufficiently robust (Dean, 1997). Learmonth (1997) pointed out that while it might be possible for the Audit Commission to evaluate some operational aspects of the LEA role, the quality of support for school improvement might be less accessible to OFSTED and there needed to be more clarity about the definition and assessment of '*improvement*'.

As the inspection programme became established, others made reference to the fact that reports appeared to focus on too narrow a view of the LEA contribution and that the perceived negative '*spin*' on some summary statements did not always provide a true reflection of the overall findings (Makins, 1998).

Other approaches had been proposed earlier. For example, the Standing Conference of Chief Education Officers and the Society of Education Officers had been involved in the development of an alternative framework of inspection for LEAs (see Kogan, 1996). This model was grounded in the principle of formative evaluation and was subsequently trialled in two LEAs using independent teams. Kogan argued that self-generated evaluations were more effective than a production model because all LEAs are different. Elsewhere, another LEA had commissioned an independent inspection under a framework devised for the Association of Chief Education Officers with OFSTED's cooperation. This was led by Margaret Maden of Keele University and involved a broader team which included a district auditor, an industrialist, a union official, a county councillor and a retired HMI. This model examined a wider set of issues (than the OFSTED framework) within the context of the LEA in question.

To coincide with the introduction of the revised OFSTED framework in 1999, The Education Network launched a report (Bird, 1999a) which provided a guide to the process for LEAs and which analysed the findings of a survey involving link officers in the 14 LEAs that had been inspected in 1998. The report concluded that the LEAs had been generally positive about the inspection process but some respondents had expressed serious reservations in relation to the perceived accuracy of the reports. A follow-up report (Bird, 1999b) suggested that LEAs were continuing to take issue with the accuracy of their published inspection reports.

To date, approximately 60 LEAs have been inspected, but as Rogers (2000) points out, the reports say more about what is wrong with LEAs than what is right. An examination of a sample of 15 inspection reports in Phase One of this (NFER) study found that critical comments often related to a perceived reluctance (on the part of LEAs) to adhere sufficiently closely to the principle of intervention in inverse proportion to success. Only one in five of these LEAs had apparently got the balance '*broadly right*'. The practice of visiting '*satisfactory*' schools on a regular basis as part of the monitoring process was described as inappropriate. This point was also re-emphasised in the most recent Annual Report from HMCI (OFSTED, 2000) which suggested that the trend was continuing. The justification for this approach (as presented by advisers in this study) is outlined in Chapter 3. On the other hand, some reports criticised LEAs for having only a '*hazy*' knowledge of their secondary schools.

One LEA was admonished for '*playing down*' its stance on zero tolerance (even though this activity was judged by OFSTED to be effective). This suggests that the subtlety and sensitivity that LEA advisers perceived to be so important in this area of work (see Chapter 5) was not fully appreciated. Other common criticisms that were noted referred to an apparent failure (by LEAs) to adhere closely enough to national priorities. In one report, for example, an LEA was criticised for promoting conflicting approaches to the teaching of literacy.

Positive comments in the reports generally made reference to rates of improvement in standards (even where performance was below national expectations), the cost-effectiveness of some services (particularly where this was tied to Best Value) and the perceived determination of some LEAs to implement necessary changes and make hard-won progress over a relatively short space of time. Overall, it was adherence to the national agenda that appeared to be a key feature of positive reports. The messages sent to LEAs were clear on that point:

'*These are the right priorities.*'

'*...these reflect national priorities.*'

'*This is an LEA which is beginning to respond to the national agenda and to improve as a result.*'

'*...coherently reflects national priorities.*'

Interestingly, LEA support for literacy (via the National Literacy Strategy) was highlighted as having a positive impact in helping to raise standards in most cases.

Much use is made of cumulative results from the school surveys (which are conducted routinely as part of the inspection process) in order to 'rate', and make comparative statements about, LEA services. However, there was evidence that in some cases, schools' ratings of services in the questionnaire contradicted the findings by HMI or were subsequently contradicted by findings from the school visits. This point supports the earlier suggestion that there can be a considerable mismatch between school expectations (about effective LEA support) and those held by central government. For example, in one LEA's report, the schools had rated the services of the finance department and the educational psychology team very highly but the evidence in the body of the report suggested there were many shortcomings in these services. In another LEA, the response to the questionnaire suggested that schools generally held a low opinion of many LEA services, but there appeared to have been a change of view by the time schools were visited. This example may suggest that the inspection team initiated probing and thorough discussions in order to substantiate the initial views of school staff. Alternatively, it may be that the visits could more effectively take a range of judgements into account. Either way, it is precisely this approach that LEA link advisers (in this study) chose to employ in their monitoring of all their schools, despite negative pressure from OFSTED and the DfEE.

Some examples were also found of report commentaries that did not necessarily reflect the evidence in the body of the report. However, although there have been some well-publicised cases in which LEAs perceived a negative 'spin', scrutiny of a sample of reports found that sometimes the spin on the commentary was favourable even though many shortcomings were identified. One LEA, for example, was said to '*efficiently exercise its statutory functions*', yet the report later went on to list a number of statutory duties which were not being properly discharged. (Other reports, on the

other hand, condemned LEAs that had failed to discharge only some of these duties). In a different report, a '*striking finding*' in the commentary was the positive impact of the advisory service on the quality of teaching, yet HMI found variable practice in the schools that were visited and a third of the secondary schools had shown no sign of improvement.

Also, in some cases, the findings of the LEA inspection report appeared to contradict the evidence from section 10 reports. For example, in one outer London borough, the section 10 reports indicated there were few '*good*' schools, yet, according to the LEA report, overall standards of achievement were '*in line with*' national norms even though this was an LEA with a relatively high proportion of bilingual and refugee pupils.

The most recent Annual Report by HMCI (OFSTED, 2000) states that there is no sign, as yet, that local education authorities are '*directly responsible*' for an overall rise in standards but adds '*nor would it be reasonable to expect any such evidence*' in view of the fact that Education Development Plans have only recently been initiated. Furthermore, the report recognises that '*the work of LEAs is only one possible influence on standards achieved in schools*'. Despite this, data collected by HMI during school visits found that the LEA contribution was judged to be effective in two- thirds of schools.

Elsewhere, however, the report states that: '[it is] *unacceptable that almost two in five of the LEAs inspected so far should have been found seriously deficient*'. Moreover, the main criticisms were largely aimed at the work of advisory and inspection services that reportedly misunderstood the support and challenge balance, were failing to implement intervention in inverse proportion to success and which failed to provide adequately experienced and skilled advisers to meet the needs of secondary schools.

There are mixed messages here, which only serve to highlight the dilemma facing local education authorities and the problems associated with evaluating the effectiveness of a role that has barely had time to become established.

6.4 Summary points

School perspectives

- Eighty-one per cent of interviewees in schools believed that LEA support was important for school improvement. Just over half of all interviewees expressed the strong conviction that all schools needed the support of LEAs to help them improve, while others believed that only some schools did. Of the 100 people interviewed in schools, only five respondents maintained that schools did not need LEAs to help them improve.
- The most important aspects of LEA support (as judged by school interviewees) were:
  - the range of practical and professional support which impacted indirectly but which enabled schools to function effectively and focus themselves on raising standards; included in this description was support for management and financial support
  - the overarching structure which prevented schools from becoming isolated and ossified
  - the overall vision and strategic overview
  - support with the implementation of 'top-down' curriculum initiatives such as the National Literacy Strategy.
- While most school interviewees recognised and valued the contribution of LEA support, they found it difficult to assess the impact of that support on standards and pupil performance. The common view was that this (indirect) impact was impossible to quantify or measure.

LEA perspectives

- LEA officers evaluated their contribution to school improvement by focusing mainly on the processes of service delivery and by monitoring aspects of quality assurance. Like schools, LEA interviewees found it more difficult to assess the impact of their support on performance outcomes.
- There was a considerable reliance on schools to recognise and appreciate the LEA contribution and unless schools were genuinely reflective, much seemed to depend on the quality of relationships between LEAs and schools. Even so, there was sometimes a mismatch about the expectations of the role, which could tarnish relationships.

- LEA interviewees argued that if partnerships (with schools) were effective, then it was very difficult to disentangle each partner's contribution. Furthermore, in the current educational climate, schools were keen to own their successes.
- The impact of LEA support was, therefore, more identifiable in the case of schools causing concern. Where schools moved out of special measures or the category of serious weaknesses, this could be viewed as a tangible and measurable outcome. Even so, it was emphasised that the LEA's contribution was only part of the solution.
- In a minority of LEAs, attempts were being made to develop ways of evaluating the LEA's impact more systematically, albeit on a small scale. Until LEAs manage to develop a range of creative and robust methods of assessing the impact of their involvement (as well as the quality of their service delivery), it is likely that their contribution will be measured largely against the progress of those schools in most difficulty.

OFSTED evaluation

- Since the introduction of LEA inspections in January 1998, there have been many debates about the remit of the framework and the perceived rigour of the process itself. The main concerns appear to be related to the accuracy of (and consistency between) report findings and the fact that report commentaries do not always accurately reflect the evidence in the main body of the report.
- Contradictory messages about the way in which LEAs are judged further highlight the dilemma facing local education authorities and the problems associated with evaluating the effectiveness of a role that has barely had time to become established.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The aims of this study were to investigate the changing role and functions of LEAs in the light of recent Government initiatives and to examine, in particular, the part played by LEAs in raising standards in schools. The broad research questions were:

- **What are the opportunities and challenges associated with the revised LEA role?**
- **How is the LEAs' contribution to raising standards measured and evaluated?**

It was, then, essential to gather a wide range of perspectives in relation to the implementation and evaluation of the LEA role in school improvement. Data were collected from in-depth interviews conducted with a total of 187 LEA and school-based interviewees in ten local education authorities.

LEAs are charged with a broad remit, though the focus on school improvement has, perhaps inevitably, become a key aspect of their role in the current political climate. The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (GB. Statutes, 1998) places a duty on LEAs to raise standards in schools, and the Code of Practice on LEA–School Relations (GB. DfEE, 1999a) describes how LEAs (and schools) should work together to discharge their respective responsibilities. Furthermore, the contribution made by LEAs to the achievement of this national target is now monitored and evaluated both by OFSTED and by the DfEE's Standards and Effectiveness Unit (through the introduction of Education Development Plans).

With the consolidation of these and other central initiatives has come the recognition that LEAs must either respond, as a matter of urgency, to the national agenda or risk becoming sidelined in the process. Significantly, Bangs (2000) observes that: '*the political signs are that LEAs, corporately, may not have yet captured sufficient ground in their bid to be the agents for raising standards*'.

The development of private sector partnerships, as exemplified by the introduction of Education Action Zones and the forthcoming City Academies, for example, underlines the fact that LEAs are no longer the sole providers of support to schools and that those authorities judged by OFSTED to be failing in their duty to discharge their statutory responsibilities, can expect to receive formal intervention from the Government. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools has reported that, of the 41 LEAs inspected by September 1999, half were found to be deficient in some respects (OFSTED, 2000).

Main findings

It is clear from the findings of this study that although the Code of Practice may have given local education authorities a new sense of purpose, it has also challenged them not only to raise standards in schools (over which they have little control) but also to provide evidence of the impact of their contributions to enhanced pupil performance.

Schools value LEA support

A key finding was that more than half of the 100 school staff and governors who were interviewed believed that *all* schools needed LEAs to help them improve and only five maintained that schools, in general, were capable of improving without LEA support.

In order for schools (and particularly primary schools) to focus their efforts on the pressing objective of raising standards, there was a strong reliance on LEAs to provide a wide range of support for school management. The overwhelming majority of governors and primary headteachers participating in this study believed that LEA support was essential in this respect. The fact that LEAs have a vested interest in, and a shared statutory responsibility for, school improvement generated a collegial sense of either culpability or pride in the performance of a school. While larger secondary schools had greater in-school capacity to be self-sufficient, the research data suggest that teachers in these schools are also apprehensive about the prospect of the professional isolation that could ensue from less contact with the LEA.

Important LEA support is often 'low-key' and unpublicised

The evidence suggests that LEA officers and advisers provide a good deal more support to schools than perhaps they are given credit for. As Tipple (1998) concludes: '*This support comes in all sorts of ways... By its very nature much of this work is unpublicised and unsung. It is, nevertheless, vital...*'. The present study identified a number of examples of LEA activity, which can be characterised as 'low-key' support. For instance, LEA officers and advisers generally exhibited a strong sense of professional loyalty to their schools and this was exemplified by their determination to protect schools from adverse publicity. Similarly, although LEAs concurred fully with the Government's stance on zero tolerance for under-achieving schools, their interventions were necessarily discreet. The provision of support for headteachers was also handled with sensitivity, so that in some cases other staff in the school were unaware of the input made by the LEA adviser – a fact which has obvious implications for any overall evaluation of the LEA contribution.

In order to discharge their statutory responsibilities effectively, LEAs require corresponding levels of empowerment

Ultimately, it is governing bodies who hold the responsibility for what happens in schools and while LEA officers agreed in principle with the development of increased delegation of funds, there was a perceived contradiction between Fair Funding arrangements and LEAs' statutory duties. In addition, the requirements for LEAs to disseminate information on best practice, to know schools well and to improve the quality of teaching were all seen to conflict with the strictures pertaining to intervention in inverse proportion to success.

OFSTED (2000) suggests that many LEAs fail to understand the required balance of support and challenge and do not always implement the principle of intervention in inverse proportion to success in their interactions with schools. However, the LEA advisers who were interviewed as part of the study felt comfortable with both the principle and with their own practice in this respect. Headteachers and governors responded to the approach in a more guarded way. The evidence suggests that more time may be required for trusting relationships to be developed between headteachers and their link advisers but that this is unlikely to be achieved unless there are sufficient opportunities for regular and meaningful dialogue. Teachers felt that LEA advisers should be more visible in schools and more accessible.

Furthermore, although LEA advisers appreciated the need for desk-based data analysis, for monitoring school performance, the consensus was that, in order to monitor all schools effectively, a cycle of routine visits was also necessary. The common perception was that there are too many variables (that influence school improvement) and not all of these can be identified effectively by paper-based analysis. Advisers have been made fully aware that they should refrain from 'interfering' in high-achieving schools but many of those who were interviewed reasoned that all schools are complex and dynamic institutions in which circumstances can change very quickly and that, in any case, data are historical.

LEAs have a duty to address local, as well as national, priorities and are likely to vary in their capacity to embrace the revised role at the same pace

There are multifarious factors that can affect an LEA's capacity to implement the newly defined role at the required pace. Since all LEAs operate within their own unique local context, it is hardly surprising that top-down initiatives are implemented in ways that reflect local circumstances (Fletcher-Campbell and Cullen, 1999). Stoll and Fink (1996) pointed out that it was important for policy makers to understand that '*all schools cannot and do not march together*' and that effective change takes time to implement – even moderate change can take three to five years. The same argument could be proffered in the case of LEAs.

The research data suggest, for example, that despite the publication of the Code of Practice, schools' expectations about the LEA role do not necessarily match those of central government. LEAs therefore may find themselves being pulled in two different directions. The messages from central government are clear but unless LEAs are seen to respond to local needs, as well as national priorities, genuine partnership with schools is unlikely to be achieved (see also Riley, 2000).

While the LEA contribution to school improvement can be evaluated in terms of the quality of processes and relationships, it may be unrealistic to attempt to assess its impact on pupil outcomes

The introduction of LEA inspections by OFSTED has excited much debate about the way in which LEA performance is evaluated and judged. A close adherence to the prescribed national agenda and positive relationships with schools would appear to be important ingredients of a favourable report. However, as discussed, these dimensions are not always entirely compatible.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of a contribution made by any partner, it is necessary first, to isolate that contribution in some way. This study found that although the majority of interviewees in schools confirmed that their LEA made a necessary contribution to school improvement, it was difficult for them to assess its impact because the nature of the LEA support they described was largely '*indirect*'. Furthermore, if there was genuine partnership, it was extremely difficult to disentangle each partner's contribution to success. LEA officers and advisers corroborated this perspective and added that other aspects of their involvement were catalystic (and therefore distanced from the output) or discreet (as described above). Officers accepted that there was a great reliance on schools to recognise and appreciate the LEA contribution but accepted that in the current climate, schools may, not surprisingly, wish to promote and underline their own effectiveness. The area of LEA activity that is perhaps more easily measured in terms of outcome is that which is related to those schools in most difficulty. Even so, it was emphasised here that the LEA contribution was only one part of the process involved in restoring a failing school back to health.

It might be argued that it is unreasonable to attempt to quantify change in pupil performance output until the change effort has had time to take effect. LEAs believed that the emphasis in evaluation should, in the immediate term, be focused on the '*processes*' (of service delivery and the building of partnerships) rather than the '*output*' (the impact of the LEA contribution of pupil performance targets). Providing the processes are right, they might reasonably be expected to have a positive impact on output. This study has identified a number of features that may help to facilitate effective processes.

These include:

- **Empowerment** to help LEAs influence the nature and extent of change in schools. For example, the requirement to disseminate good practice needs to be balanced with sufficient opportunities for advisers to access classrooms in order to identify examples worth sharing more widely. While schools are usually willing to share good practice, the reliance on self-nomination is probably not the most effective approach. It is worth noting that the duty placed on LEAs to monitor the Literacy Hour, was considered by advisers and teachers to be particularly helpful in terms of sharing best practice.

- **Awareness** of what schools actually want from their LEA. It should be noted, for example, that many subject and class teachers felt that LEA advisers had become less accessible because the focus of their work had shifted to supporting headteachers on whole-school issues. In the light of new curriculum initiatives, it is important for some teachers to be able to access professional advice from colleagues outside their own establishment. This indicates the need for LEAs to build relationships with teachers as well as headteachers.

- **Agreement** about what LEAs can and cannot reasonably be expected to provide for schools. For example, the research found a lingering expectation in schools that LEAs ought to be providing a range of support across the curriculum. The requirement for LEAs to charge schools for curriculum advice was, therefore, a source of tension amongst teachers who perceived this as being unsupportive. In order to build and maintain positive relationships with schools, LEAs may need to provide clear information on their responsibilities towards schools, the services they must provide and the additional support they could provide.

- **Time** and adequate opportunities for LEAs to develop effective partnership with schools. Policy makers must accept that in order for LEAs to develop and maintain positive relationships with schools, they need to be able to invest sufficient time in that process. This is particularly important for new or reorganised LEAs. Rigid expectations about the amount of time advisers may or may not spend on school visits can be restrictive and unhelpful in this respect.

- **Knowledge** of schools and their context in order for link advisers to challenge them effectively. LEA advisers who were allocated time to analyse school performance data before making their monitoring visits felt better equipped to challenge and probe. Headteachers tended to value this level of preparation. It is important that termly monitoring visits have a developmental focus and this requires time and preparation. Without this, monitoring visits may be perceived (by both parties) as a superficial audit exercise.

- **Trust** and mutual respect between link advisers and headteachers. Trusting relationships take time to develop but unless they are established, headteachers may become reluctant to disclose areas of concern or weakness. Since the link adviser is the 'face' of the LEA as far as schools are concerned, it is important that LEAs themselves develop rigorous systems to ensure that advisers are supported and monitored effectively.

- **Acknowledgement** of the wide-ranging LEA support that goes on 'behind the scenes'. It is important that policy makers recognise and acknowledge this necessarily discreet element of the LEA role in school improvement, even though it is difficult to discern and measure.

Proving added value, in terms of output, was perceived to be fundamentally more problematic, requiring a longer period of evaluation. However, LEAs do not have time on their side. The Government course has been set and LEAs must respond accordingly in order to secure their future role. The pressure, therefore, is on local education authorities themselves to try to develop rigorous systems (in consultation with schools) that can measure their contribution to school improvement. The findings of this study demonstrate that LEAs are trying to meet this challenge by seeking to provide evidence of their achievements, taking account not only of progress which can be reported in quantitative terms but also of good practice of a more qualitative nature. The wide range of support provided by LEAs, as documented in this report, indicates clearly that the continuing role of LEAs in school improvement is a role worth fighting for.

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