

# planning for action

**Part 1:  
A SURVEY OF SCHOOLS'  
POST-INSPECTION  
ACTION PLANNING**

**Karen Maychell  
Shalini Pathak**

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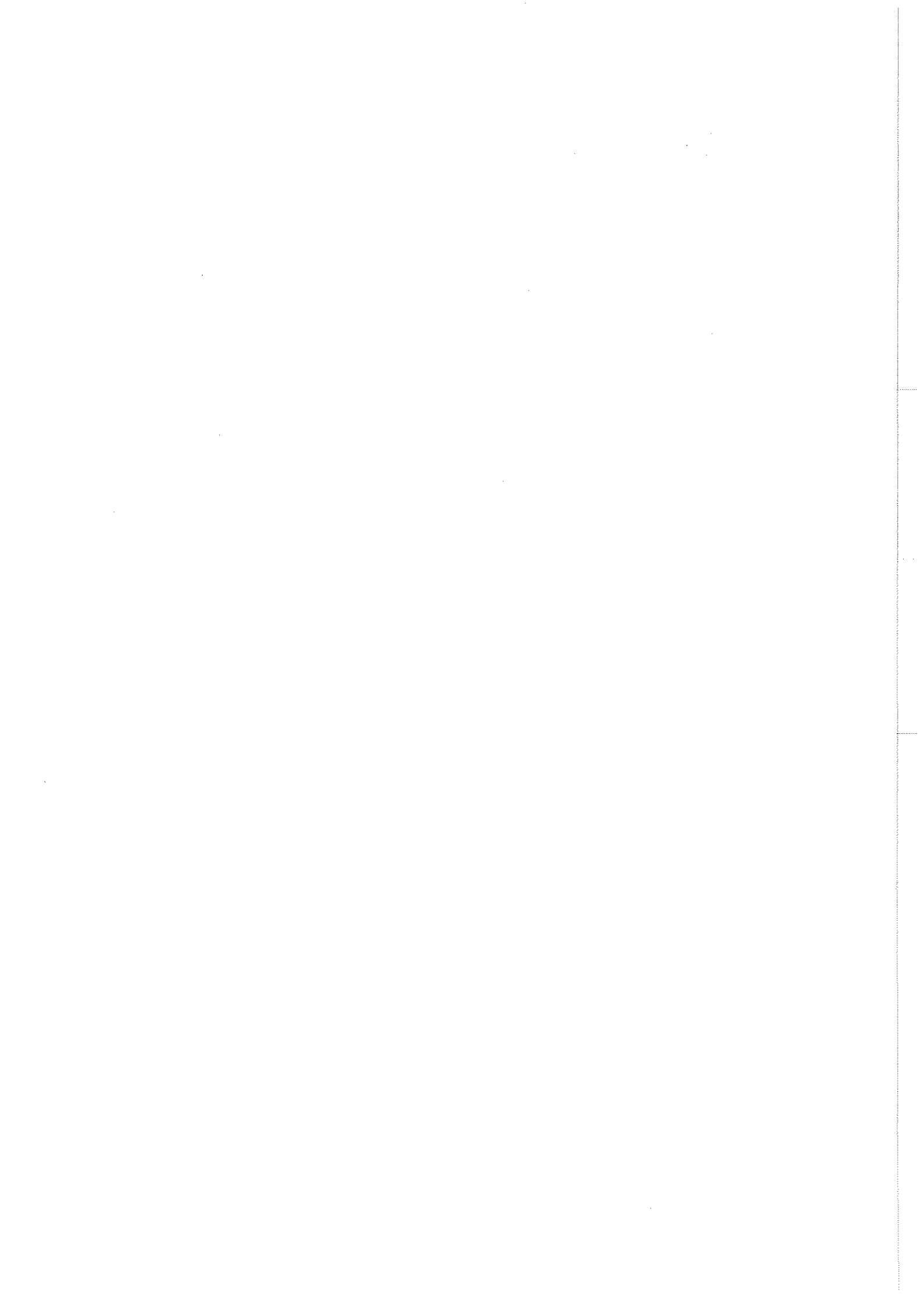
INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# PREFACE

In September 1995, the NFER embarked on a 15-month research study called *The Impact of Inspection and Action Plans*. The project was part of the NFER's 1995/6 Membership Programme of research, which is funded mainly through local authority contributions. The research was in two phases: a national questionnaire survey; and detailed case studies in ten schools. Two reports have arisen from the research, each focusing on a different phase.

**This report presents the findings from the *first phase* of the research.** It is based on questionnaire responses from just over 200 schools nationwide and describes the process and outcomes of post-inspection action planning. Providing as it does *quantitative* evidence of the impact of inspection and action plans, it is anticipated that the report will be of wide general interest, particularly to those working at the strategic and policy level within the educational arena.

**The report on the *second phase* will be published in summer 1997.** This phase of the research involved follow-up case studies in ten of the survey schools. It focused on gathering qualitative information on schools' experiences of action planning, as seen from the various perspectives of headteachers, school governors, curriculum coordinators and other teachers. The report will illuminate the different stages in the action planning process and provide schools with valuable information and guidance on good practice in relation to their own post-inspection action planning.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to record our appreciation for the continuing goodwill and generosity of those working in schools. In particular, we would like to express our gratitude to the many headteachers who completed a questionnaire, and the staff and governors in the ten case-study schools who generously gave of their time to talk to us about inspection and action planning.

We should also like to express our sincere thanks to members of the project's advisory group. Their guidance in shaping the study and their comments on the draft version of this report have been invaluable.

Within the NFER there are many individuals who have helped this research come to fruition to whom we extend our thanks. We would especially like to thank Dr Wendy Keys, the Project Director, for her guidance and support.

Karen Maychell  
Shalini Pathak

I should also like to thank my friend and colleague Shalini Pathak for managing all aspects of the project while I was on maternity leave. The positive outcome of the study is in large part due to her sound judgement and dedication in steering the project through its formative stages and data collection phases.

Karen Maychell

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## A new system of inspections

The Education (Schools) Act 1992 (GB. Statutes, 1992) set out far-reaching changes in the school inspection process. Section 9 of the Act introduced a system of school inspections more detailed and comprehensive than had previously been known in England. A system of independent inspections to be carried out on a four-year cycle was proposed, beginning in September 1993 for secondary schools and September 1994 for primary, special and nursery schools. A new non-ministerial department to be known as the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) came into existence in September 1992, charged with the responsibility of administering the system of inspections and training inspectors. Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI), previously responsible for carrying out school inspections, would be part of OFSTED. HMI's role was now focused more on providing professional advice to monitor and regulate the quality of inspections, with reduced involvement in carrying out inspections.

Information on the statutory requirements of inspections and on the various stages of the inspection process can be found in the School Inspection Regulations (GB. Statutory Instruments, 1993), DFE Circular 7/93 (GB. DFE, 1993), the Framework for the Inspection of Schools (OFSTED, 1995a) and the Handbook for the Inspection of Schools (OFSTED, 1994a). These last two publications have been updated since the first OFSTED inspections.

## The purpose of inspections

Under the Schools Act, the role of OFSTED and school inspections was to be markedly different to that of HMI and the local education authority (LEA) inspections which had previously taken place. Prior to OFSTED inspections, each local education authority made its own arrangements to ensure the quality of the teaching and learning in its schools. HMI's role was: to advise the Secretary of State on educational issues and to inspect a representative sample of schools each year to gather information about current trends and practice and to evaluate the quality of education.

The new system of inspections, carried out by teams of independent inspectors, less closely connected to the inspected school than LEA inspection teams or local HMI, was designed to place much greater emphasis on evaluation of the quality of education provided, making each school accountable for its pupils' achievement and



development. Inspection reports are public documents and provide evidence when comparing schools' performance. Information gathered from inspections is compiled annually and presented to the Secretary of State by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI).

Under the Schools Act, the central purpose of inspection is to evaluate standards and to aid school improvement by: identifying schools' strengths and weaknesses; highlighting areas for development; and requiring schools to draw up an action plan showing how they will address these issues. There are four aspects of a school on which the inspectors' comments are based. These are:

- the quality of education provided by the school
- the educational standards achieved by the school
- whether the financial resources made available to the school are managed efficiently
- the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils at the school.

It is envisaged that through the action planning process and the implementation of the action plan, schools will develop systems to maintain and extend good practice and address weaknesses, where identified.

### **Post-inspection action plans**

The NFER research reported here was concerned with the action planning phase of the inspection process. Following the inspection, the registered inspector must produce a report and summary of findings within 25 working days (five weeks) of the last day of the inspection. After receiving the registered inspector's report, the governors of an inspected school are charged with drawing up an action plan, based on the key issues identified in the report, within 40 working days (eight weeks). These periods exclude holidays of more than one week, but include holidays of one week or less. The governing body must send the action plan within five days of completion to OFSTED, parents of registered pupils at the school, all staff and employees of the school, the LEA (or Secretary of State if the school has grant-maintained status), those who appoint foundation governors, if applicable, and, in the case of secondary schools, to the local Training and Enterprise Council (TEC).

Where a school is declared in need of special measures (i.e. the registered inspector believes that the school is failing or likely to fail to provide its pupils with an acceptable standard of education),

it must still prepare an action plan like any other school. However, the action plan must be sent to the Secretary of State and HMCI. If the school is LEA-maintained, LEA advisers are expected to work with the school to prepare the action plan. The LEA also has a further ten days to present its own plan, detailing the support it will offer to the school (GB. DFEE and OFSTED, 1995).

Action plans in all schools must be based on the 'key issues for action' highlighted in the school's inspection report and are the main tool for development after the inspection. Schools may publish an overall development plan with more priorities than in the action plan; however, as stated in DFE Circular 7/93, they must make clear which of their objectives are in response to the inspection report. They must also indicate: the specific action to be taken under each key issue; what constitutes a realistic timetable for action; who will be involved; and the probable resource implications of implementing the action plan. Implicit in these requirements is the notion that a clearly written action plan with specific objectives will be a more effective working document in guiding school development. The revised Framework for the Inspection of Schools (OFSTED, 1995a) introduced modifications in the reporting of key issues, stipulating that these should be ordered in priority of importance in improving pupils' attainment. These changes should assist schools in the action planning process, by helping them to determine the scale of work to be undertaken, and in drawing up a timetable for improvement.

Circular 7/93 recommends particular criteria which schools should include in their action plans:

- personnel responsible for specific action should be identified
- there should be a timetable for action
- success criteria for each action
- setting target dates for action points.

The process of action planning and implementation of the action plan are intended to ensure that the inspection process does not finish on the last day of inspection. Although OFSTED usually has no further contact with schools once action plans have been submitted, it is implicit in the emphasis on schools drawing up their own action plans that much school improvement will take place after this point. OFSTED literature has emphasised the importance of inspections to school improvement. The 1995 edition of the Framework for the Inspection of Schools states:

*The purpose of inspection is to identify strengths and weaknesses so that schools may improve the quality of education they provide and raise the educational standards achieved by their pupils... The inspection process, feedback*

*and reports give direction to the school's strategy for planning, review and improvement by providing rigorous external evaluation and identifying key issues for action (p.5).*

The OFSTED system of inspections is still relatively new, and it is too soon to know conclusively whether these new inspection procedures lead to school improvement, as OFSTED intends. However, some preliminary research studies have been conducted, involving schools that were inspected in some of the earliest OFSTED inspections. The following section discusses some of the main findings from these studies.

### **Inspection as a mechanism for school improvement**

OFSTED commissioned Coopers & Lybrand to carry out a review of the first 100 secondary schools inspected under the new system (OFSTED, 1994b). The report reiterated OFSTED's role in school improvement:

*OFSTED of course has a statutory regulatory function. Our intention, however, is to do more than regulate; it is also to promote good inspections through improvement of the inspection arrangements and, above all, to provide a system and conditions which facilitate school improvement (OFSTED's emphasis).*

Inspection was felt to contribute to school improvement in a number of ways. Coopers & Lybrand found that schools reviewed their methods of organisation, schemes of work and policies and improved on these *in preparation for an inspection*. They found that many schools used the Framework for Inspection of Schools and the Handbook as part of a self-review prior to the inspection, to gauge themselves against the criteria OFSTED would be using in the inspection, although much attention was given to administrative and organisational issues and only a small proportion of schools reviewed and improved their teaching and learning processes as part of their preparation (OFSTED, 1994b, 1995b). Another OFSTED study, by Matthews and Smith (1995), argued that the benefit of the inspection process is based on the provision of an external, objective audit of strengths and weaknesses with prioritised suggestions for improvement (p.30). If this information complements priorities already identified by the school, and gives the school feedback regarding how well they are performing and suggestions as to aspects that could be improved, then it would appear that potential school development is one of the outcomes of inspection. Indeed, the review of inspected schools conducted by

OFSTED (1995b) and research carried out by the British Educational Management and Administration Society (BEMAS) (Ouston *et al.*, 1996), has shown that schools themselves are positive about the potential improvement arising from inspections and had high expectations about inspection and its role in school development. Fidler (1996a) also comments that inspections may be helpful for schools; however, he stresses that while well-run schools will benefit from such a review, poorly run schools will find inspections less helpful. This, he says, is because OFSTED inspectors only point to areas in need of improvement – it is beyond their remit to advise on strategies schools could use to bring about improvement. Indeed, OFSTED inspectors are constrained by statute from offering schools advice.

Action planning and implementation of the action plan are another potential source of school improvement. Early research suggests that schools are sowing the seeds of improvement through developing strategies in their action plans, which should yield benefits in years to come. In the OFSTED report *Inspection Quality 1994/1995* mentioned above, Professor Michael Barber of Keele University and Paul Fuller of Touche Ross suggest in their commentary that inspections were leading to improvement in the schools inspected in the previous academic year:

*The data suggests that the great majority of schools inspected had incorporated the key issues for action in their action plans and made discernible progress towards implementation (p.4).*

However, the extent to which these key issues had been implemented is unclear. Similarly, a survey carried out by HMI (OFSTED, 1995c) found that of 85 schools inspected during the first year of inspection, nearly two-thirds had:

*... made discernible progress at an early stage in tackling some of the key issues in a way which was leading or likely to lead to improvement, by taking measures to improve teaching, raise expectations, address underachievement or ensure that pupils had more positive attitudes to their work (p.4).*

Despite this, the same report argues that only a very small minority of schools had set specific targets for improvement of pupils' achievement. It is likely that much of the initial progress reported in both these studies was concentrated on particular areas of schools' action plans which were easier to implement than others, as Gray and Wilcox (1995) found in their study of the implementation of post-inspection action plans. For example, although Matthews and Smith (*op. cit.*) report that many key issues in early action plans have been implemented, they concede that these have largely related to the writing of policies and schemes of

work, management and administrative issues and the provision of particular learning resources. One of the key elements of school improvement, that of teaching and learning, had been addressed only by a minority of schools:

*A smaller number of action plans have also set out practical strategies to tackle more complex matters, such as the improvement of teaching and raising standards.*

If schools are favouring the more administrative- and management-oriented key issues over those that relate more directly to improving teaching and standards in schools, then this should be cause for concern. However, Gray and Wilcox (op. cit.) argued that it is unlikely that real improvement in standards will occur soon after the inspection. Although their research took place before the first formal OFSTED inspections, Gray and Wilcox found that issues relating to assessment, curriculum delivery, evaluation and teaching and learning were at best only partially implemented a year after inspection. This is hardly surprising; real improvement in achievement and standards is inevitably a long-term challenge. As Barber and Fuller (in OFSTED, 1995b) note:

*Ultimately the success of the inspection process will depend upon its impact judged in terms of its effect on levels of pupils' achievement measured through examination results, tests and other means, but at this stage, it remains too early to study its impact in this respect.*

Of course, inspection cannot on its own lead to improvement in a school. There are various factors, relating to inspection, that are likely to contribute to change. For example, the impact that inspection makes on a school's development is likely to depend on the extent to which the school has already identified the key issues in the report and its plans to address these. Also, while inspection provides the external pressure for schools to improve the education provided, staff and governors must understand the weaknesses highlighted and be willing to change their practice. If a school is to benefit fully from the inspection process, the desire to change should be present in the school as a whole. Wilcox and Gray (1994) argued that collective responsibility is an important factor contributing to change. Similarly, Tabberer (1996) said that superficial changes, or 'bureaucratic implementation' of recommendations will not in themselves lead to improvement. The BEMAS research (Earley, 1996) found that those who benefited from inspection the most were those who were most optimistic about its value at the outset. If staff and governors are suspicious about inspections, whatever their justifications, then there is less likely to be improvement.

## Research on the action planning process

There has been much commentary and research on various aspects of the OFSTED inspection process, ranging from teachers' responses to inspection (Brimblecombe *et al.*, 1995 and 1996; Metcalfe and Russell, 1996; Wilkinson and Howarth, 1996) to parents' views on OFSTED (Ouston and Klenowski, 1995; Tabberer, 1995). However, there is relatively little research on the process of post-OFSTED action planning and how schools tackle this issue, although, as shown earlier, action planning is often mentioned in the context of inspection and school improvement, and the extent to which implementation of action plans will contribute to this.

Two recent studies concerning action planning deserve a brief mention here. The first study has already been alluded to. A survey of action plans and action planning in a representative sample of 85 schools (mainly secondary) inspected during the academic year 1993-94 was carried out by HMI. Findings were presented in a report entitled *Planning Improvement: Schools' Post-Inspection Action Plans* (OFSTED, 1995c). Schools were visited and the views of headteachers, governors and teachers were taken. In addition, information was gathered from 15 schools which required special measures or which had serious weaknesses. The main purpose of the report was to give guidance to schools faced with drawing up their action plan, from the research findings. The survey found that schools and governing bodies had responded positively to producing their action plans.

The report recommended early preparation for action planning; in the survey, a third of schools had started action planning before receiving the written report. Good practice suggested in the report included: setting specific targets in the action plan for raising standards or improving provision; practical strategies and programmes for development; and arrangements for monitoring and evaluating the progress and impact of strategies. Although three-quarters of schools had set out a clear timetable and identified the person responsible for each action point, few schools had developed criteria for monitoring implementation and only a small number had considered the resource implications of their actions.

The second piece of research was undertaken by BEMAS and reported by Ouston *et al.* (op. cit.). Information was gathered from a questionnaire survey in May 1994 to all 282 secondary schools inspected during the autumn term 1993. These headteachers were then contacted two years after the inspection for their views on inspection and the school's development. Another aspect of the

follow-up study was a replica survey of headteachers whose schools were inspected in 1994, a year after the original survey of schools (Earley, op. cit.).

Interestingly, although governors are legally responsible for drawing up a school's action plan, in the first survey, almost half of respondents said that their governing body had played little or no part in drawing up the action plan. Only six per cent said that they had made a *major* contribution. Nine per cent were said to have made no contribution at all. The replica survey of schools inspected in 1994 showed slightly more involvement. Ironically, Earley notes that:

*...the research showed that in those schools where inspection was said to have had a major contribution to development, the governing body was involved in drawing up the action plan as were external advisers.*

The BEMAS research showed that in most schools there was some overlap between schools' existing school development plans (SDPs) and their action plans. In the original survey, only six per cent of schools reported a complete overlap. The second survey showed a greater link between SDPs and action plans, with fewer schools reporting a complete difference between the two. This raises interesting questions about schools' preparation for inspections and their identification of weaknesses through use of OFSTED materials in readiness for the inspection. The link between school development plans and action plans is discussed later in the report.

## 2. RESEARCH OUTLINE

Little is known about how schools approach action planning: the process of drafting the action plan, the assigning of responsibility for writing and coordinating the plan and difficulties, if any, encountered. In addition, there is so far only limited information about the implementation of action plans. What are the managerial, resource and training implications of developing and implementing action plans? What factors help or hinder schools in achieving the targets in their action plans? What impact does inspection and action planning have on school development?

In order to answer these questions, NFER undertook a 15-month research project to investigate schools' perceptions of action planning. The research had two aims:

- ◆ to explore the ways in which schools approach the task of developing and implementing action planning
- ◆ to identify changes in policy and practice that result from schools' action plans.

The study was carried out in two phases: a questionnaire survey of a representative sample of primary and secondary schools recently inspected; and detailed case-study work in ten schools. The work involved in each of these two phases is described below.

### Phase 1: questionnaire survey

In February 1996, a questionnaire was sent to headteachers in 394 schools (199 primary and 195 secondary) that had been inspected in spring or summer 1995. The schools were identified using the OFSTED database of inspected schools, from which a random sample of schools was drawn. The main aspects addressed in the questionnaire were:

- 'key issues for action' recommended in OFSTED inspection reports
- the process of drafting an action plan
- the effect of action plans on existing school development plans
- the resource, managerial and training implications of implementing action plans
- facilitating factors and difficulties in implementing action plans
- headteachers' views of inspection and action plans
- parental involvement in inspection and action planning.



After two written reminders, 207 completed questionnaires were returned, providing an overall response of 53 per cent (primary, 58 per cent; secondary, 47 per cent). *The data presented in this report are derived from these schools.* The responding schools were broadly representative of the sample as a whole in terms of school size, metropolitan/rural LEA and region. A follow-up study of the 187 schools that did not participate in the survey was carried out, with the result that 120 of them gave reasons for their non-response. The two most common reasons for non-participation were: general lack of time/pressure of work (91 schools); and the large number of survey requests (81 schools). Twenty-two schools indicated the reason was because there was a new headteacher in post since the inspection. Only five schools indicated that a negative inspection experience was the reason for their non-participation.

### **Phase 2: follow-up interviews and case studies**

The second stage of the research took place between May and July 1996. It involved case studies in five primary and five secondary schools. In each of these, interviews took place with the headteacher, selected members of the teaching staff, and at least one school governor. A total of 67 interviews were carried out during the course of the case studies, which sought to build up a detailed profile of how the schools had set about action planning, which individuals were involved and exactly what part they played in the action-planning process, the extent to which the plan had been implemented and the factors influencing this, as well as the impact the whole process had had on school development.

This case-study phase of the research will be reported in a complementary report published in summer 1997. It will extend the survey information on school action planning presented in this report, with particular emphasis on identifying good practice in relation to the different approaches that were adopted and the outcomes these had.

### 3. SUMMARY OF NFER RESEARCH FINDINGS

This summary presents the main findings from the questionnaire responses of just over 200 schools nationwide (115 primary and 98 secondary schools).

#### Themes arising in school inspections

- ◆ The four most common themes arising from *primary school* inspections were: curriculum planning; school development planning; curriculum delivery; and specific curriculum subject areas.
- ◆ In *secondary schools*, five common areas emerged: school development planning; staff roles, responsibilities and training; pupil assessment practices; and pastoral issues.

#### Key issues for action

- ◆ *Primary school* inspection reports contained an average of approximately *six key issues for action*. On the basis of primary headteachers' responses, the most common ones were:
  - schemes of work (35 per cent of primary schools)
  - curriculum planning (32 per cent)
  - quality of teaching (31 per cent)
  - role of curriculum coordinators (29 per cent)
  - monitoring SDP and curriculum policies (27 per cent)
  - school development planning (26 per cent).
- ◆ *Secondary schools* had an average of approximately seven *key issues for action*. On the basis of secondary headteachers' responses, the most common ones were:
  - monitoring SDP and curriculum policies (42 per cent)
  - pupil assessment practices (35 per cent)
  - pupil attendance (31 per cent)
  - pupil underachievement (31 per cent)
  - health and safety (26 per cent).

- ◆ The need to fulfil the statutory requirement to provide a daily act of collective worship for all pupils was highlighted in 70 per cent of secondary school inspections.
- ◆ Most headteachers were not surprised by many of the key issues for action: over three-quarters of them said that, of the list of key issues, more than half had been 'expected'. Also, the vast majority of headteachers felt that more than half of their school's key issues for action were 'appropriate'.

## The action planning process

- ◆ The action plan generally took between three and six weeks to complete.
- ◆ Schools were broadly divided between those that started the action planning process *before the inspection* (one in four schools), those that started *after the oral feedback* (one in five schools) and those that waited until *receipt of the written report* (one in three schools).
- ◆ Schools consulted widely during the process of action planning. Besides the headteacher, the following people were often involved: the chair of governors; other governors; deputy headteacher(s); subject coordinators/heads of year; and other teachers.
- ◆ LEA advisers were involved in the action planning process in three-quarters of primary schools and more than half of secondary schools.
- ◆ Primary and secondary schools differed as to who took responsibility for *coordinating and drafting* the action plan. The most common approach in primary schools was that the headteacher alone took this role (one in three schools), while in secondary schools, it was most often the responsibility of the SMT as a whole to undertake this job (one in three schools).

## Headteachers' views on OFSTED feedback

- ◆ Ninety per cent of headteachers found the *oral feedback* they had from OFSTED inspectors useful for planning purposes. Oral feedback to subject specialists was also popular in secondary schools, though less so in primary schools.
- ◆ Ninety per cent of headteachers found the main written OFSTED report useful for planning purposes.
- ◆ OFSTED's oral feedback to school governors was also widely perceived as helpful in planning (around two-thirds of headteachers said this was the case).
- ◆ Twice as many primary schools (41 per cent) as secondary schools (20 per cent) reported difficulties in drawing up the action plan. These fell into three categories: practical problems (of which lack of time was the main one, but also some schools had difficulty in deciding on the format for their plan); personnel difficulties (e.g. low staff morale, staff dislike/disagreement with some of the key issues); and problems with the key issues themselves (e.g. key issues not fully understood, overlap between key issues, too many key issues).

## Implementing action plans

- ◆ Between six months and a year on from inspection, virtually all schools had at least *begun* to implement *most* of their key issues.
- ◆ Most schools *had not* fully implemented their action plans, but about a quarter of schools had substantially implemented *more than half* of their key issues.
- ◆ According to headteachers, the most important factors *facilitating* implementation were the *commitment of the people involved* and *an understanding of the issues/process of action planning prior to the inspection*.

- ◆ Many schools involved the LEA in the implementation stage of action plans; about two-thirds of primary headteachers and over half of secondary headteachers said they received advice and support from their own LEA personnel regarding the implementation of the action plan.
- ◆ Headteachers said the main *difficulties* in implementing action plans were: *time limitations*; problems regarding *personnel issues*; and *financial/resource problems* (much more commonly reported by secondary headteachers).

## Financial and training implications

- ◆ Very few schools received any financial support from their LEA (or FAS) to help implement their action plan (since these schools were inspected, new procedures for the allocation of Grants for Education and Support and Training (GEST) funding have been introduced).
- ◆ Almost 90 per cent of primary and secondary headteachers mentioned *in-service training* as a resource implication of implementing their school's action plan. Related to this, many headteachers indicated that *advisory services/support* and *supply cover* were needed to meet targets in the action plan.
- ◆ In over three-quarters of schools, staff received in-service training to help them address targets in the action plan. Training for governors was less common and took place in only about a third of schools.

## Monitoring the implementation of action plans

- ◆ In 95 per cent of schools, internal procedures were in place to monitor the implementation of the action plan. Common methods used were:
  - monitoring through feedback to governors
  - monitoring by particular staff or committees involved with specific key issues
  - monitoring by the senior management team
  - monitoring through the school development plan.

- ◆ Fewer than three in ten schools used external procedures for monitoring, such as employing LEA personnel or independent consultants to review implementation of the action plan.

## Link between action plans and school development plans

- ◆ Six out of ten schools had incorporated the action plan into their school development plan (SDP). In some cases, this made very little difference as the key issues for action from the inspection were very similar to priorities that had already been identified in the SDP.
- ◆ One in ten secondary headteachers said that in their schools, the action plan and SDP remained separate documents.

## Headteachers' views on the impact of action planning

- ◆ Only one in five headteachers reported any negative outcomes from the whole inspection and action planning process. Mostly, these headteachers felt that it had made very little difference to their school and some said that the inspection had resulted in low morale and increased stress among staff.
- ◆ Almost all headteachers identified some positive outcomes from their experiences of inspection and action planning. These included:
  - a focus for improvement
  - a national benchmark against which to compare themselves
  - an increase in staff morale or confidence
  - a 'common purpose' among staff, or 'team building'
  - a useful way of introducing change in the school
  - improvements to curriculum development.

## 4. KEY ISSUES FOR ACTION

An important focus of the questionnaire survey was the 'key issues for action' that each school received as part of its inspection report. It was found that primary schools had an average of approximately six key issues for action, though the actual number ranged between three and ten key issues in individual schools. Secondary schools had an average of approximately seven key issues for action, ranging from between three and 13 key issues in individual schools.

### Themes emerging in school inspections

From an analysis of the key issues for action, as summarised by headteachers, certain aspects emerged as common themes. A synthesis of these themes is presented in Figure 1. (In denominational schools, key issues that were identified during Section 13 inspections have been excluded from this analysis.<sup>1</sup>)

The most common theme across both primary and secondary sectors was *school development planning*, which was raised in around six out of ten school inspections. The other common themes, arising in around 40 to 50 per cent of primary and secondary school inspections, were: *curriculum delivery*; *staff roles, responsibilities and training*; *pupil assessment*; and *improvement in specific curriculum subjects*.

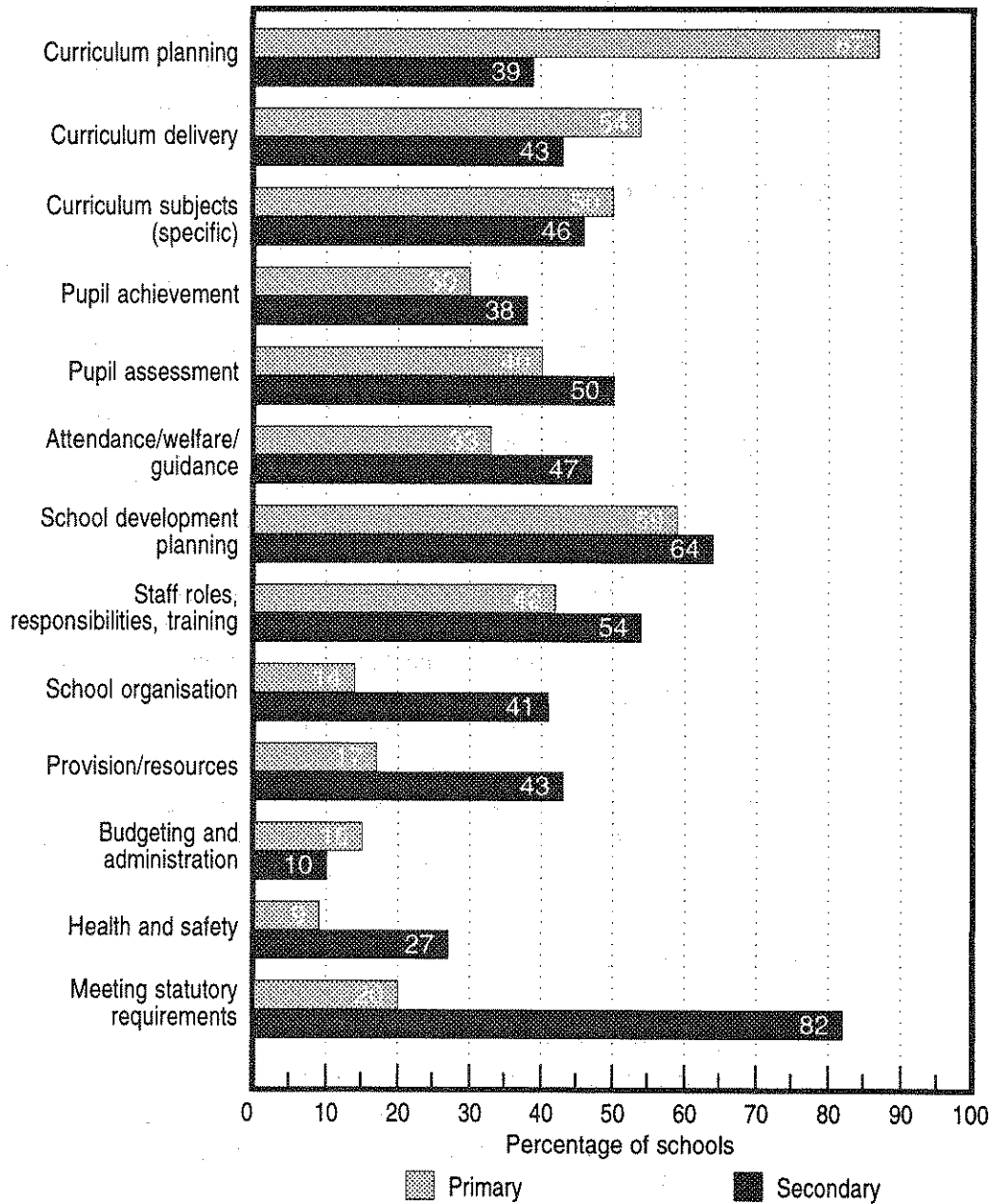
However, some themes emerged particularly strongly in only one sector. *Curriculum planning*, for example, was identified for action in almost 90 per cent of primary school inspections, compared with around 40 per cent of secondary school inspections. In the secondary sector, the most common theme was *meeting statutory requirements* (mostly this related to daily acts of collective worship for all pupils), which was identified in around 80 per cent of secondary school inspections, but only 20 per cent of primary school inspections. Also more common in the secondary sector were key issues relating to *school provision and resources*, *school organisation* and *health and safety*.<sup>2</sup> (Figure 1 gives full details.)

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<sup>1</sup> Under the Education (Schools) Act 1992, governors in denominational schools must arrange an independent inspection of religious education, not HMCI. Registered inspectors leading a Section 9 inspection in a denominational school may not inspect the content of RE, only whether the statutory requirements of collective worship are taking place.

<sup>2</sup> Registered inspectors are required to report any breach of statutory requirement or health and safety issue found during an inspection as a key issue for action, whatever the scale of the breach.

**Figure 1** Synthesis of the main themes emerging in key issues for action in inspection reports



Percentages are based on the number of schools that completed a questionnaire: primary N = 115; secondary N = 98.

*N.B.* The percentages above relate to schools, not key issues. Schools may have had more than one key issue under any broad category heading, but were not counted more than once. For example, 87 per cent of primary schools had at least one key issue relating to curriculum planning.



## Details of specific key issues

Having examined some of the broad *themes* that emerged in the inspections, this section focuses on the *most common key issues for action*. (The table in Appendix 1 shows a full breakdown of **all** the key issues for action that were reported by responding schools.)

### ◆ *Curriculum planning*

As is shown in Figure 1, more than twice as many primary schools as secondary schools had been given key issues for action which related to *curriculum planning*. Furthermore, closer inspection of the key issues themselves revealed that there were different emphases between primary and secondary schools when it came to curriculum planning (Appendix 1). The most common key issues that had been identified for action in primary schools related to developing schemes of work and reviewing the role of curriculum coordinators (each mentioned by around a third of primary schools). Other key issues had featured in fewer primary school inspection reports: reviewing the whole school curriculum plan; developing clearer learning objectives; and improving subject planning (each mentioned by between ten and 20 per cent of primary schools). In contrast, very few secondary schools had been directed towards any of these five activities. For them, the most common key issue within *curriculum planning*, being reported by about one in five secondary schools, had been the need to develop a curriculum policy for specific subjects or for particular groups of pupils (e.g. age-related or ability-related groups).

### ◆ *Curriculum delivery*

Around a third of primary schools and a quarter of secondary schools had been told they needed to improve the quality of teaching generally (Appendix 1). Smaller proportions of primary and secondary schools had been advised to consider specifically the needs of more able pupils. Also, one in ten primary schools had been told they needed to improve the teaching of their younger pupils.

### ◆ *Specific subjects*

Not surprisingly, recommendations for action had come across the spectrum of curriculum subjects. The most common subjects arising in primary school inspections had been: information technology (IT) (23 per cent); cultural and personal/social education (PSE) (11 per cent); and English/reading/oracy (ten per cent). Among secondary school respondents, PSE had most often been highlighted as a key issue for action (21 per cent of schools), although there was also some emphasis on literacy and numeracy skills, with 14 per cent of schools being told they needed to focus

on English/reading/oracy, and 12 per cent of schools being directed towards developing mathematics (Appendix 1).

◆ ***Pupil achievement***

Two out of ten primary schools had been given key issues that implied praise for the level of pupil achievement or general quality of education they were providing (Appendix 1). This had usually been expressed as a suggestion that the school should maintain current levels of achievement. However, one in ten primary schools had been told they needed to raise levels of achievement or address underachievement among their pupils. In the secondary sector, the situation was reversed, with three out of ten schools being told to raise levels of achievement; while one in ten had had key issues stating that they should maintain their current levels of achievement.

◆ ***Pupil assessment***

Over a third of secondary schools and a quarter of primary schools reported key issues that indicated they needed to improve their pupil assessment practices generally (Appendix 1). Also, 14 per cent of primary schools had been told they needed to use pupil assessment to plan future learning. Only five per cent of secondary schools reported having this type of key issue.

◆ ***Attendance/welfare/guidance***

Almost a third of secondary schools reported key issues pertaining to pupil attendance, such as truancy problems, registration procedures and monitoring attendance. This had not been raised as a key issue in most primary schools. Indeed, very few primary schools reported key issues relating to pastoral affairs. The most common one had been the need to develop a behaviour policy, being reported by one in ten primary schools (Appendix 1).

A small proportion of primary schools had been commended for what might be called their school ethos. In such cases the key issue for action had been phrased as a suggestion that the school should continue with what they were already doing regarding the moral, spiritual and/or cultural development of pupils. Very few secondary schools had been given key issues of this nature (Appendix 1).

◆ ***School development planning***

Around a quarter of schools had been told that they needed to improve their school development planning generally (Appendix 1). However, the need to monitor the implementation of the SDP had been raised in more secondary school inspections (just over 40 per cent) than in primary inspections (slightly less than 30 per cent).

◆ **Staff roles/responsibilities/training**

An important finding relating to secondary schools in particular, is the disparity that inspectors had identified between the quality of teaching being delivered by different teachers in the same school. A quarter of all secondary schools and 14 per cent of primary schools had been told that this was a key issue for action (Appendix 1). This was reported by headteachers as 'the need to disseminate good teaching practice to the whole school' or 'the need to improve the consistency in the quality of teaching across the whole school'. Another key issue which was reported to have come up often in inspection reports was the need to introduce, clarify and/or provide training for certain staff roles within the school, e.g. year leaders, curriculum coordinators, heads of department. Again, almost a quarter of secondary schools and 16 per cent of primary schools had been given key issues relating to this aspect. Finally within this category of roles, responsibility and training, a small number of schools (around ten per cent overall) had been told that specialist expertise was lacking in some subjects. Inspectors had indicated that INSET or even the appointment of new teachers might be needed to overcome the problem.

◆ **Organisation issues**

The need to address organisational issues appeared to have been most commonly raised in secondary schools. Accommodation was the most common aspect mentioned, with just under a quarter of secondary schools being advised to look into specific accommodation problems – for example lack of laboratory space, toilet facilities. The length of the school day and/or timetabling problems was the next most common aspect, being reported by 18 per cent of secondary schools. Also, around ten per cent of secondary schools had been given key issues relating to the need to review pupil grouping arrangements (for example, setting, banding) and a similar proportion were advised of the need to review or improve their sixth-form provision (over half the secondary schools responding to the survey made provision for Years 12 and 13). Among primary schools, the only organisational aspect to be raised often was that of accommodation, with ten per cent of schools indicating that this had been raised as a key issue for action (Appendix 1).

◆ **Provision/resources**

Figure 1 revealed that there were twice as many secondary schools as primary schools indicating key issues for action linked to *provision and resources*. IT was the most common concern, with 17 per cent of secondary schools being told they needed additional IT resources, or to make better use of IT in other curriculum subjects (Appendix 1). Other aspects for which provision/resources

were found to be lacking concerned pupils with special educational needs, or library facilities/use. Very few primary schools had had key issues relating to shortages in provision and resources.

◆ ***Budgeting and administration***

It had been suggested in around 15 per cent of primary inspections and ten per cent of secondary inspections that budgeting arrangements could be improved. The sorts of comments that had been made focused on the need to balance the budget, to review financial procedures, or to improve cost-effectiveness.

◆ ***Health and safety***

Aspects relating to health and safety had been raised as key issues in many secondary school inspections; over a quarter indicated having key issues relating to some aspect of health and safety, compared with less than ten per cent of primary schools. The problems that had been identified covered a wide range, from the cleanliness in parts of the school, to safety aspects in workshops and science laboratories, to general fabric of the buildings (Appendix 1).

◆ ***Meeting statutory requirements***

The most common key issue for action that had arisen in secondary school inspections was the requirement upon schools to provide a daily act of collective worship for all pupils. This key issue for action was reported by 70 per cent of secondary schools and 13 per cent of primary schools. Many headteachers indicated that they had difficulties in meeting this statutory requirement because they did not have the accommodation available to gather the whole school together. The need to meet statutory requirements relating to the National Curriculum had also arisen as a key issue for action in 17 per cent of secondary schools and four per cent of primary schools (Appendix 1).

## **What did headteachers think of their schools' key issues?**

Headteachers were asked to indicate next to each key issue for action whether they considered it appropriate or inappropriate. These responses were analysed to gain an overall impression of the level of satisfaction within each school. As can be seen from Table 1, most headteachers found most of their schools' key issues appropriate. Only ten per cent of primary headteachers and two per cent of secondary headteachers disagreed with the majority of their schools' key issues.

Table 1 Proportion of key issues for action considered appropriate by headteachers

KEY ISSUES	Primary %	Secondary %
All appropriate	48	48
More than half appropriate	42	50
Up to half appropriate	10	2
None appropriate	0	0
<i>No response</i>	2	0
TOTAL	100	100

Percentages are based on the number of schools that completed a questionnaire: primary  $N = 115$ ; secondary  $N = 98$ .

*N.B.* The proportions in the above table were calculated by the research team, not headteachers.

Primary headteachers' reasons for feeling that key issues were inappropriate centred on their belief that recommendations suggested by inspectors were already being implemented (46 out of the 57 who found any inappropriate expressed this view). About a third of them also felt that the inspection team had not seen the school under normal circumstances and therefore had not obtained a full picture. A general disagreement with the inspectors' rationale was another commonly mentioned reason. Of the 51 secondary headteachers who believed that at least one of their key issues was inappropriate, the most common reason was a difference of opinion with the inspectors (20 headteachers). Belief that the action was already taking place, and a feeling that recommendations were not realistic or achievable were also reasons commonly cited (each by 15 headteachers). Again, some headteachers felt that the inspection team did not get a complete picture of the school (13 headteachers).

Headteachers were similarly asked to indicate alongside each key issue whether or not it had been *expected* (Table 2). Again their own thinking was close to that of OFSTED inspectors, with eight out of ten secondary headteachers and seven out of ten primary headteachers indicating that they had anticipated most of the key issues that came up. However, more than two out of ten primary headteachers and one in ten secondary headteachers had expected *only up to a half* of the key issues listed.

**Table 2** Proportion of key issues for action expected by headteachers before inspection

KEY ISSUES	Primary %	Secondary %
All expected	19	28
More than half expected	50	58
Up to half expected	25	12
None expected	0	0
<i>No response</i>	6	2
TOTAL	100	100

Percentages are based on the number of schools that completed a questionnaire: primary  $N = 115$ ; secondary  $N = 98$ .

*N.B.* The proportions in the above table were calculated by the research team, not headteachers.

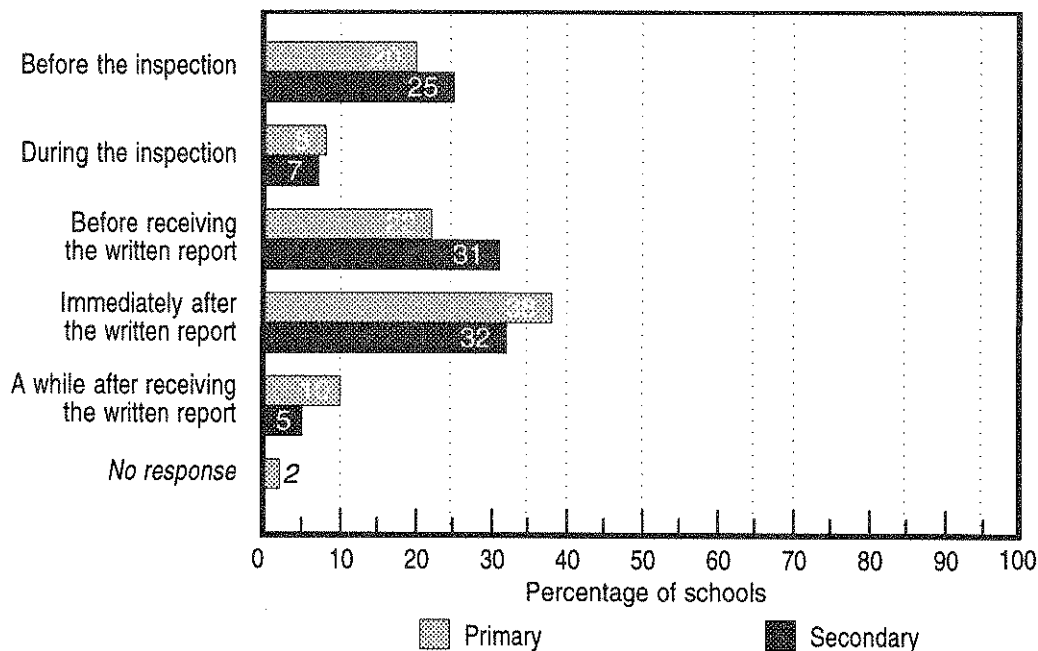
## 5. DRAWING UP THE ACTION PLAN

### When do schools begin their action planning?

Official guidance to inspected schools recommends starting the action planning process at an early stage. DFE Circular 7/93 recommends that schools '*should be giving preliminary thought to the action plan from the date of the inspectors' oral feedback on their main findings*', that is, before receiving the inspectors' written report.

In this survey a fifth of primary and a quarter of secondary school headteachers indicated that in their schools, action planning began even *before the inspection* (Figure 2). Just under a quarter of primary schools and just under a third of secondary schools started their action planning *before receiving the written report*. The most common time to start action planning was found to be *immediately after receiving the written report* (about a third of primary and secondary schools).

Figure 2 Stage at which action planning process began

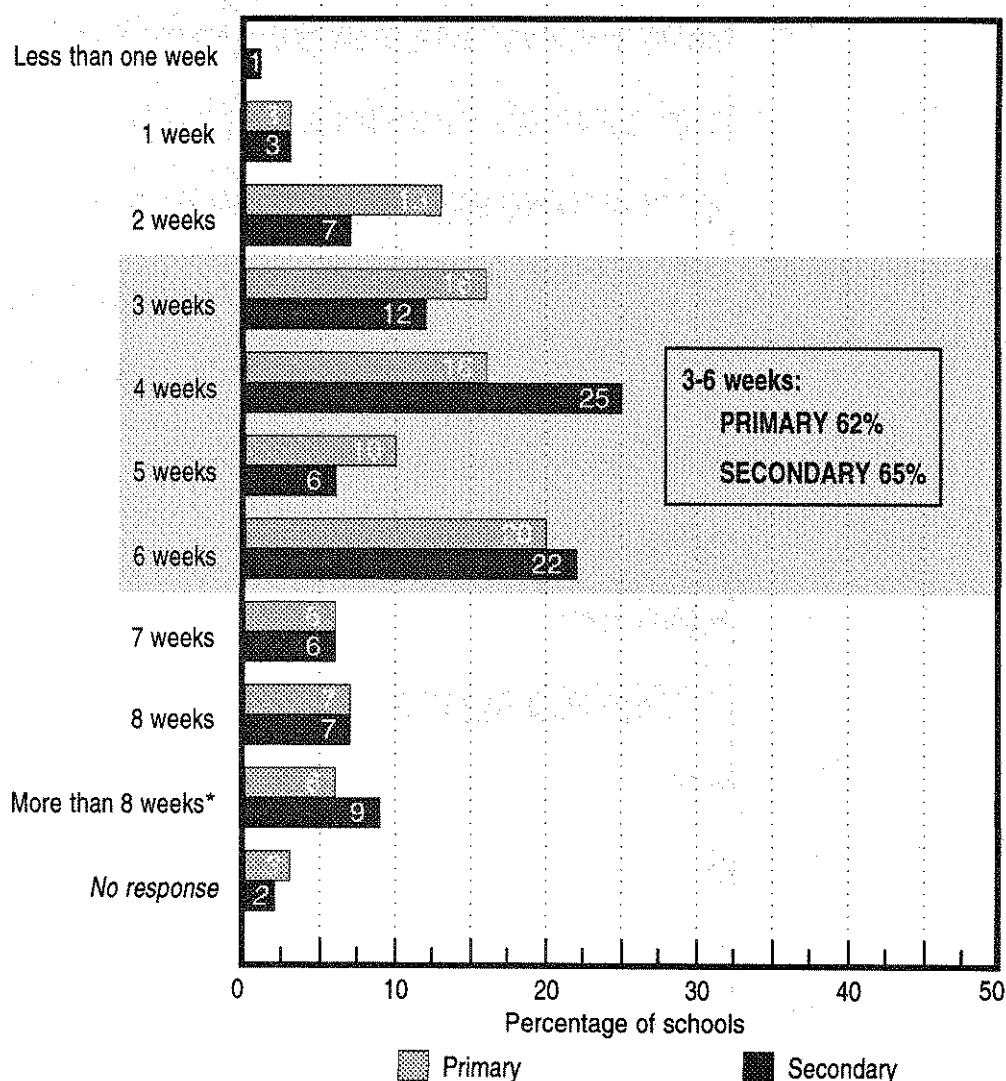


Percentages are based on the number of schools that completed a questionnaire: primary N = 115; secondary N = 98.

## How long does action planning take?

Upon receiving the registered inspector's published report, the governors of an inspected school are required to draw up an action plan within 40 working days (eight weeks). The NFER survey found that the majority of schools were adhering to this time frame (Figure 3); most schools took between three and six weeks to complete their action plans (62 per cent of primary schools and 65 per cent of secondary schools). However, six per cent of primary and nine per cent of secondary schools took *more* than eight weeks to draw up their action plan.

**Figure 3** Length of time schools took to draw up an action plan



Percentages are based on the number of schools that completed a questionnaire: primary N = 115; secondary N = 98.

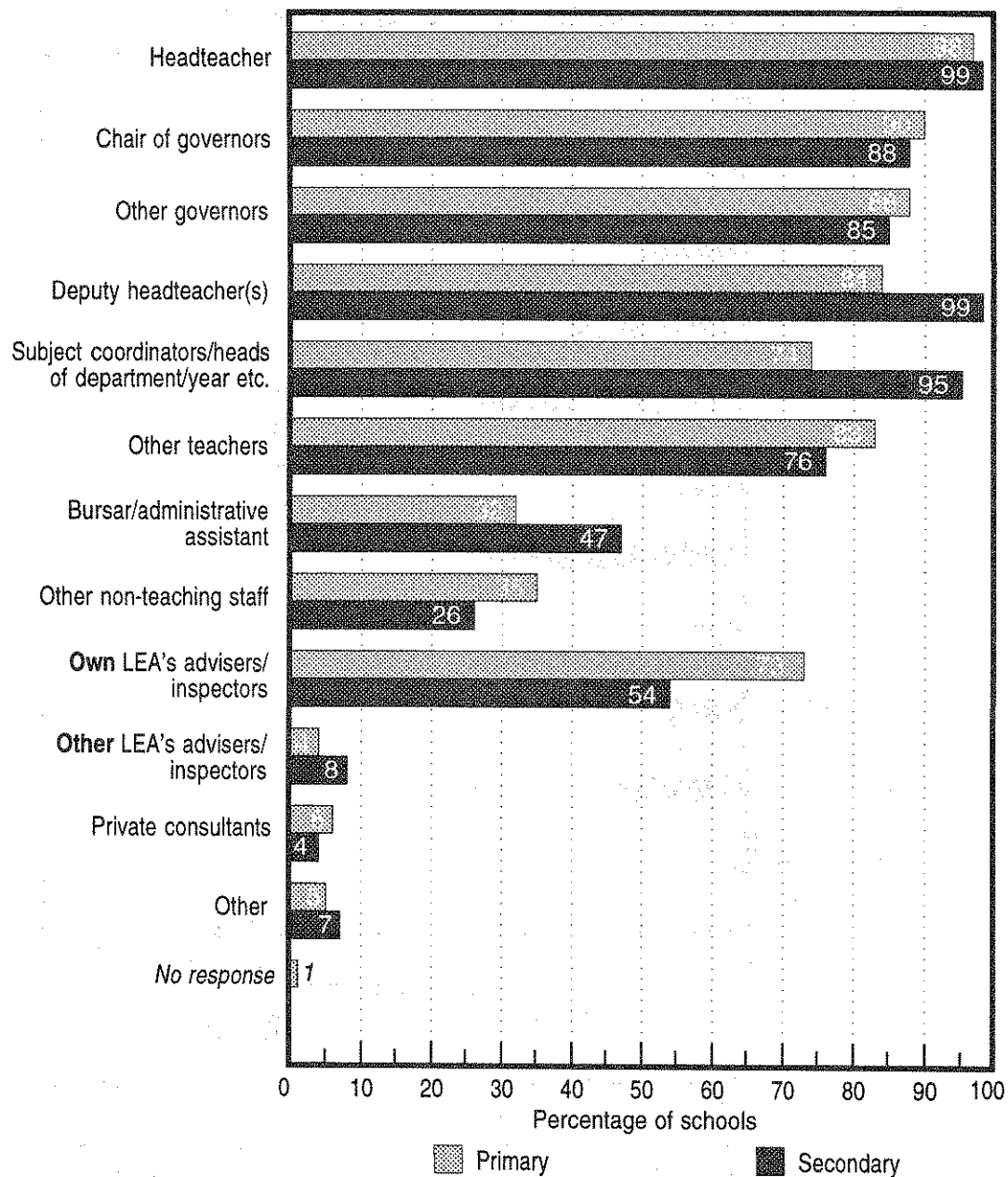
\* Of the schools that reported taking more than eight weeks to draw up their action plan, three primary and two secondary schools had inspections near to the end of the summer term which meant that the action planning process was interrupted by the school holidays. For the other schools, the reason for the delay is not known – school holidays were not a factor.



## Who is involved in action planning?

Far from being a solitary task for the headteacher, schools involved a number of people in the action planning process – commonly staff, governors and LEA advisers. The following people were each mentioned by *more than three-quarters of primary and secondary schools*: headteacher; chair of governors; other governors; deputy headteachers; subject coordinators/heads of department; other teachers; and, in primary schools, LEA advisers (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4** People involved in school action planning process



Percentages are based on the number of schools that completed a questionnaire: primary N = 115; secondary N = 98.

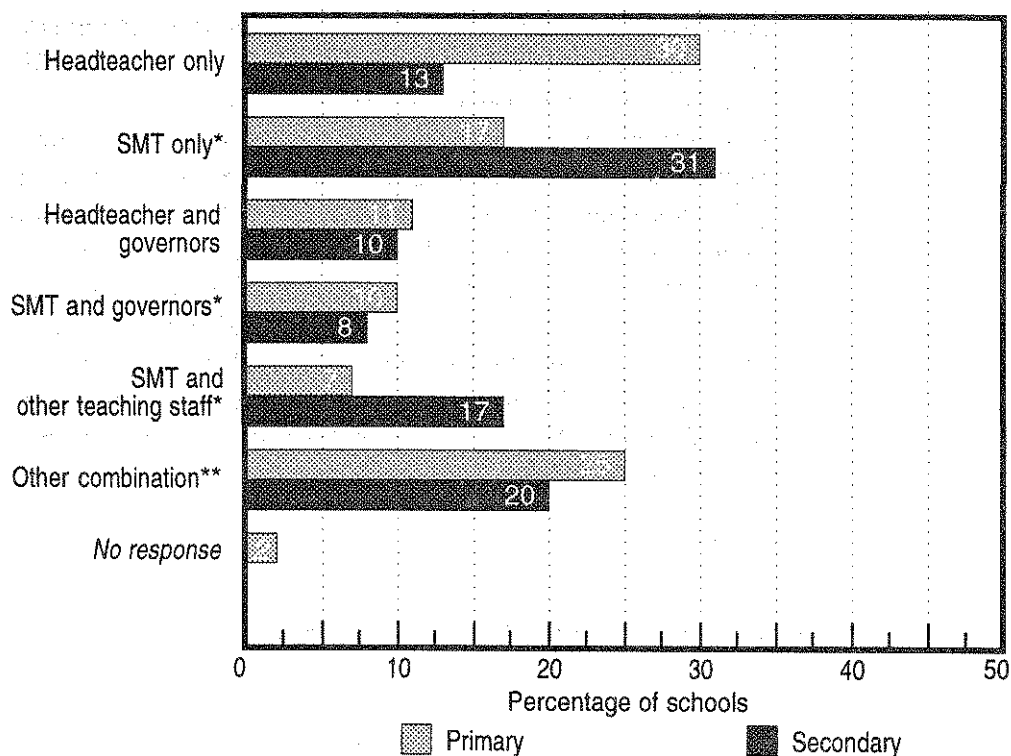
This question allowed respondents to tick as many categories as applied. On average, primary headteachers made seven responses; secondary headteachers made six responses.

Also, in around a third of primary schools and almost a half of secondary schools, the bursar or administrative assistant was involved, and in around a third of primary schools and a quarter of secondary schools, other non-teaching staff were also mentioned. However, between primary and secondary schools some notable differences emerged: for example, it was far more common for primary schools to involve LEA advisers/inspectors (73 per cent of primary schools compared with 54 per cent of secondary schools). Other differences most probably reflect the differences in the organisation and size of primary and secondary schools; for example fewer primary schools involved the deputy headteacher (84 per cent of primary schools compared with 99 per cent of secondary schools) and senior teachers such as heads of department and subject coordinators (74 per cent of primary schools compared with 95 per cent of secondary schools).

## Who coordinates and drafts the action plan?

While many people were involved in the process, inevitably a smaller number of people had a key role in *coordinating and drafting* the action plan (see Figure 5). It was far more common for primary headteachers than secondary headteachers to carry out this task alone (30 per cent and 13 per cent respectively). The most common approach in secondary schools was for the SMT as a whole, including the headteacher, to share responsibility for coordinating and drafting the action plan (17 per cent of primary and 31 per cent of secondary schools). Also, secondary schools more often involved other teachers along with the SMT (seven per cent of primary schools, 17 per cent of secondary schools). However, in some primary and secondary schools governors were also involved in actually coordinating and drafting the action plan. Most often, they shared this responsibility with the headteacher alone (11 per cent of primary schools, ten per cent of secondary schools), but also sometimes they worked with the SMT as a whole (ten per cent of primary schools, eight per cent of secondary schools). A wide range of other combinations of staff, governors and, sometimes, LEA personnel had a key role in coordinating and drafting the action plan, though none were found in any great numbers of schools.

**Figure 5** Most common combinations of people with responsibility for drafting the action plan



Percentages are based on the number of schools that completed a questionnaire: primary N = 115; secondary N = 98.

This question allowed respondents to tick as many categories as applied.

On average, primary headteachers and secondary headteachers made two responses.

\* The SMT included the headteacher.

\*\* These covered a wide range of other combinations of staff, governors and, sometimes, LEA personnel.

## How useful is post-inspection feedback?

The published report is one form of feedback following a school's inspection. According to OFSTED's 1994 Framework for the Inspection of Schools, which applied when the schools in this survey were inspected, the registered inspector must also produce a summary for parents which should contain the main findings of the inspection, the key issues and basic information about the school. The registered inspector is also required to discuss the main findings with the headteacher and any other staff invited by the headteacher, and to offer to give an oral report to the governing body. All of these must take place as soon as possible after the inspection, before the written report is published. The aim of the oral feedback is explained in the Framework:

*The purposes of these discussions are to share with those concerned the outcomes of the inspection, to provide an opportunity for clarification through response to questions and, if necessary, to check on matters of factual accuracy (p.12).*

The content and delivery of post-inspection feedback and the way the school interprets and makes use of this are obviously crucial to any future development planning that takes place (Ormston *et al.*, 1995). The points for action identified through written and oral feedback to various school personnel and parents ought to form the basis for forward planning in the days and weeks after the inspection. For this reason, headteachers in this study were asked to indicate on a four-point scale (from 'very useful' to 'no use at all') how helpful the different types of OFSTED feedback had been for action planning purposes. Figures 6a – e show the responses headteachers made. (It should be borne in mind that headteachers answered on behalf of their staff for certain aspects.) It was found that where headteachers commented favourably on one type of feedback, they were also likely to have positive views on other forms of feedback. Their responses to each individual form of feedback are described under the following headings.

#### ◆ **Oral feedback to head and SMT**

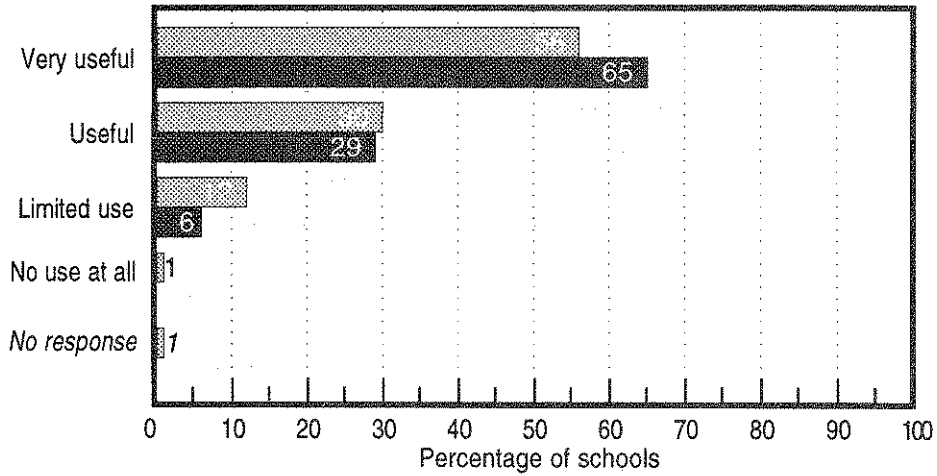
By far the most useful form of feedback was reported to be the *oral feedback to headteachers*, which was delivered sometimes in the presence of the school's senior management team (Figure 6a). The majority of headteachers (86 per cent of primary and 94 per cent of secondary) felt that the oral feedback they received had been useful for action planning purposes. Very few negative responses were made about oral feedback to headteachers: only 13 per cent of primary headteachers and six per cent of secondary headteachers were critical of the oral feedback they received. Those that elaborated on their negative views of the oral feedback said that it had not extended what had later been learned from the written report.

#### ◆ **Oral feedback to governors**

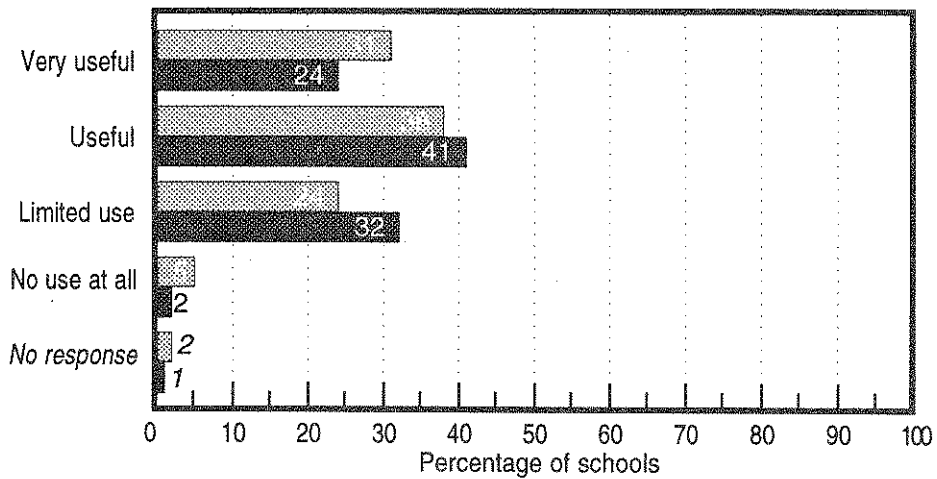
The OFSTED inspectors' *oral feedback to governors* was also felt to be of benefit, although to a lesser extent (Figure 6b). About two-thirds of primary and secondary headteachers reported that this type of feedback was useful as a planning tool (69 per cent of primary and 65 per cent of secondary headteachers). However, almost a quarter of primary headteachers and just under a third of secondary headteachers said that the oral feedback to governors was of 'limited use' for planning purposes and a few said the governors' feedback had been 'no use at all'.

**Figure 6** Headteachers' views on usefulness of different forms of OFSTED feedback for planning purposes

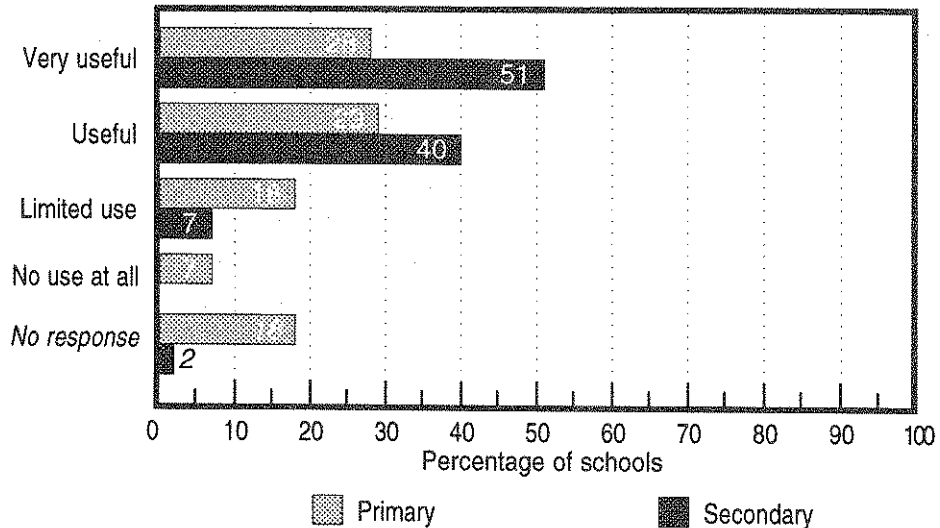
**a) ORAL FEEDBACK TO HEADTEACHER (& SMT)**



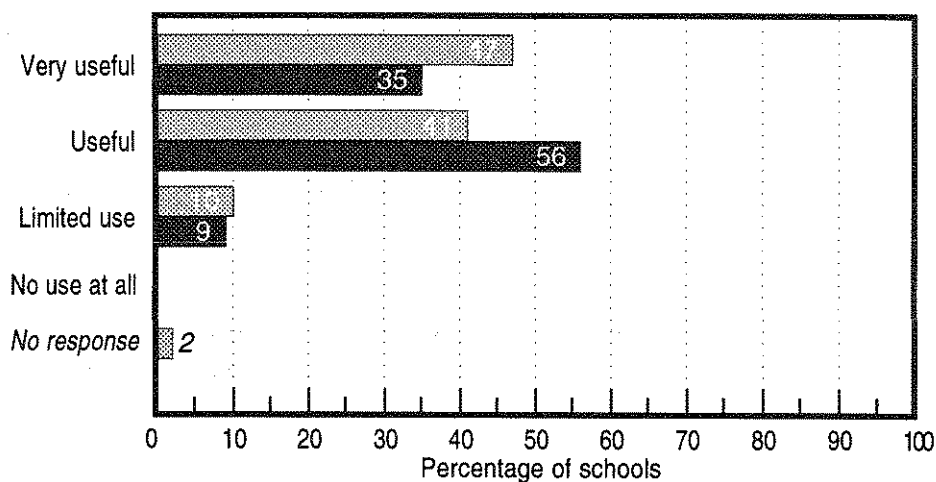
**b) ORAL FEEDBACK TO GOVERNORS**



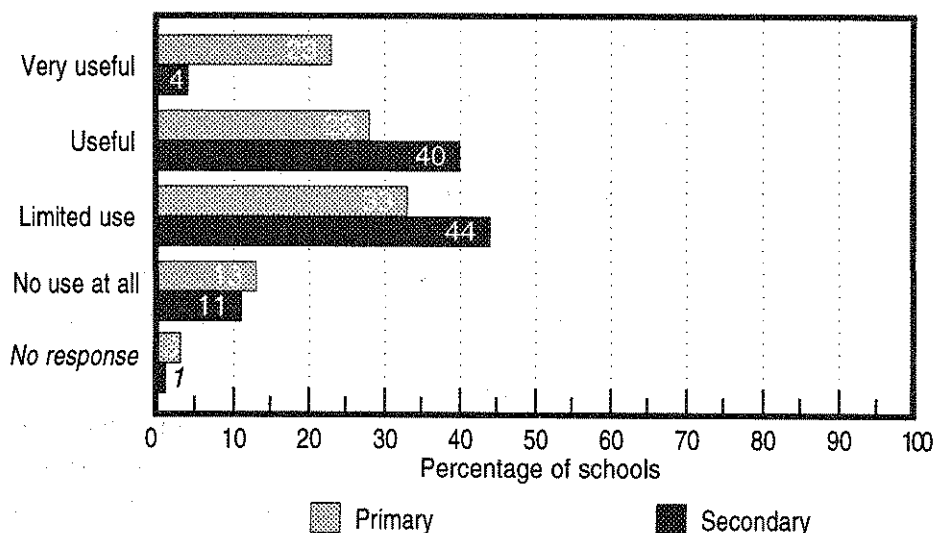
**c) ORAL FEEDBACK TO SUBJECT COORDINATORS/HEADS OF DEPARTMENT**



## d) MAIN WRITTEN REPORT



## e) WRITTEN PARENTAL SUMMARY



Percentages are based on the number of schools that completed a questionnaire: primary N = 115; secondary N = 98.

◆ **Oral feedback to subject coordinators/heads of department**

In secondary schools, *oral feedback to subject coordinators/heads of department* was widely felt to have been beneficial (Figure 6c). The vast majority of secondary headteachers (91 per cent) indicated that this form of feedback had been useful for action planning. Very few secondary headteachers said that this oral feedback to coordinators had been of 'limited use'.

Fewer primary headteachers (57 per cent) gave a positive response about the feedback to subject coordinators. Furthermore, around a quarter made negative remarks about the feedback, most of these saying it was of 'limited use'. However, it should be noted that 18 per cent of primary headteachers made no response at all on this part of the question – many of them explained that the OFSTED inspectors did not give this type of feedback (i.e. oral feedback to subject coordinators) or did not give enough oral feedback to subject coordinators.

### ◆ **Main written OFSTED report**

The vast majority of headteachers (88 per cent primary, 91 per cent secondary) described the main report written by OFSTED inspectors after an inspection as a useful document for planning purposes (Figure 6d). When invited to expand on why they had found it useful, most headteachers failed to comment; a few repeated it had helped in planning.

Only about one in ten primary and secondary headteachers gave a negative response regarding the written OFSTED report, indicating it was of '*limited use*' for planning purposes. The main reasons given for this were: the report had not been well written, e.g. it lacked clarity or the inspectors had different styles; more specific written feedback would have been appreciated, e.g. to subject coordinators; parts of the written report were at variance with what had been said in the oral feedback; and the written report had been too bland.

### ◆ **Written parental summary**

There was no clear consensus regarding the usefulness of the written summaries provided by OFSTED inspectors for parents (Figure 6e). Since they are specifically intended for a parental audience, it is not surprising that many more headteachers felt that these summaries were of '*limited use*' or '*no use at*' all as a planning tool. Forty-six per cent of primary headteachers' responses and 55 per cent of secondary headteachers' responses fell into these categories. Only a few headteachers expanded on their negative response regarding the usefulness of the parental summary. Five felt it had been too difficult for parents to understand, while five were unhappy with the content, describing it variously as potentially damaging, one-sided, misleading or at variance with the written report.

## **What difficulties are there in drawing up action plans?**

More than twice as many primary schools as secondary schools experienced difficulties in drawing up the action plan. Forty-one per cent of primary headteachers said '*yes*' their school did have difficulties, compared with only 20 per cent of secondary headteachers. These difficulties fell into three categories: practical difficulties; personnel difficulties; and problems with the key issues themselves (Table 3).

Table 3 Difficulties experienced by schools when drawing up action plan

DIFFICULTIES	Primary N	Secondary N
Practical difficulties	35	24
Personnel difficulties	24	9
Problems with key issues themselves	22	7
TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONSES	81	40
TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	47	20

*N.B. The figures in this table represent the number of responses, NOT the percentage of schools.*

#### ◆ **Practical difficulties**

The largest group of problems came under the heading of what could be called practical difficulties. Lack of time was the most common factor, being indicated by around a quarter of the primary and secondary schools that reported any problems in drawing up the action plan. A similar proportion of schools found that deciding on a format for the action plan was problematic. Other practical difficulties were less commonly reported, and included: difficulties of involving all staff in the process of action planning; financial implications such as paying for supply-cover time or advisers' time; setting realistic time schedules for the key issues to be implemented, particularly in the context of the four-year inspection cycle; and including all the key issues in the action plan, given their financial implications. Some schools also found the timing of the inspection made action planning difficult, since the school holidays intervened in the process.

#### ◆ **Personnel difficulties**

Various personnel problems were mentioned in connection with difficulties in drawing up the action plan, including: low staff morale following the inspection; staff dislike of some of the key issues; key posts were new appointees (e.g. headteacher, chair of governors); and difficulties associated with involving governors or parents in action planning. None of these difficulties appear to have been common, since each were mentioned by fewer than eight schools, although this may be because other difficulties were simply more important (see above).



### ◆ *Difficulties with the key issues*

Again, while a variety of difficulties emerged with the key issues themselves, particularly among primary schools, none were common (each listed by fewer than 13 schools). One problem was that schools found some key issues difficult to understand – they reported a lack of clarity in the way in which these had been presented by the inspection team and/or written down. Other difficulties included: too many key issues to address or too many action points under each key issue; key issues that were difficult to break down into specific action; overlap between different key issues for action; lack of constructive advice from the inspection team on how to tackle the key issues;<sup>3</sup> key issues that conflicted with LEA guidelines; and identifying action points for key issues where the school was doing well on a specific aspect.

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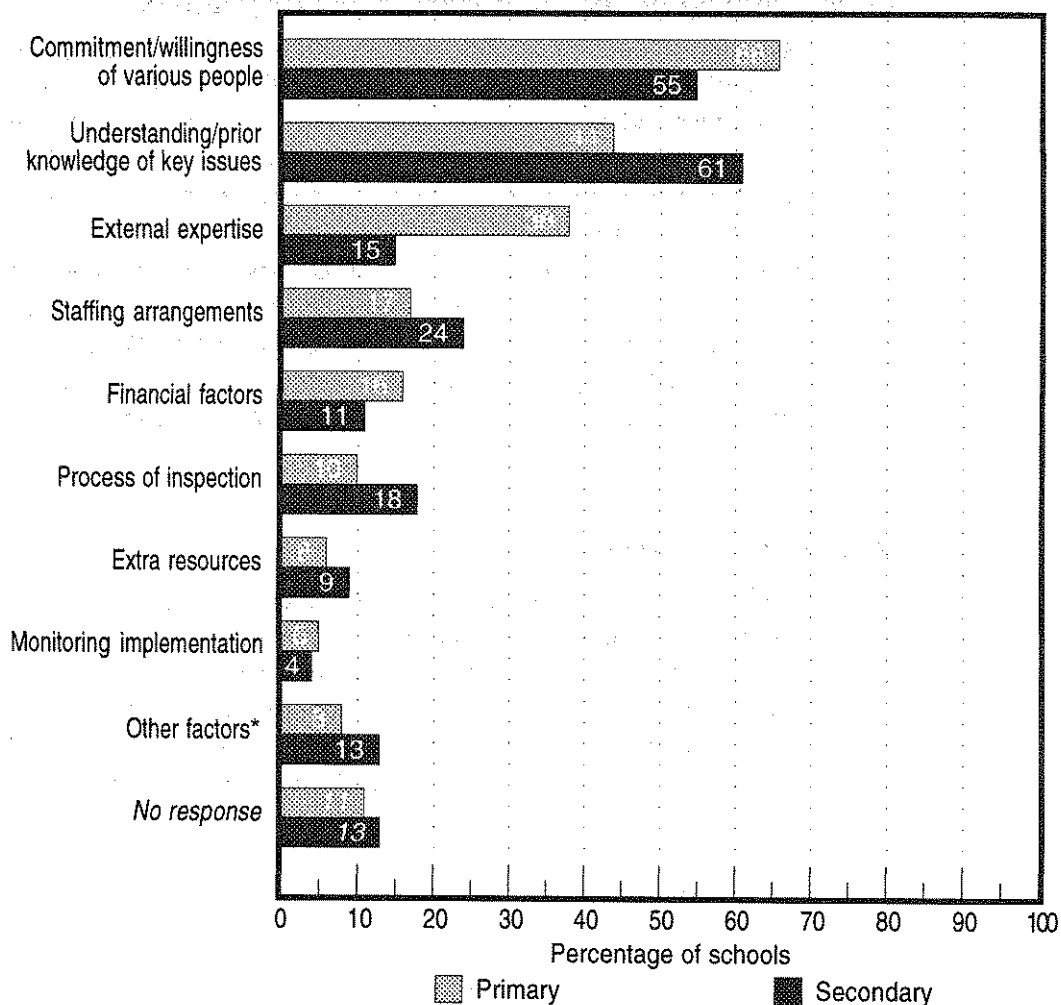
<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that inspectors are prevented by statute from offering such advice to schools during an inspection.

## 6. IMPLEMENTING THE ACTION PLAN

### What factors facilitate the implementation of action plans?

Headteachers were invited to list up to five of the main factors that they felt *facilitated* the implementation of their school's action plan. A summary of their responses is presented in Figure 7. The *main* facilitating factors that emerged revolved around the qualities of the personnel involved, an understanding of the key issues, the use of external expertise, and staffing arrangements. However these aspects appear to have been accorded varying levels of importance in the primary and secondary sectors. The main findings arising within each of these broad areas are described in the following paragraphs (Appendix 2, Table 1 gives full details).

**Figure 7** Main factors *facilitating* implementation of action plan



Percentages are based on the number of schools that completed a questionnaire: primary N = 115; secondary N = 98.

This question allowed respondents to make as many responses as they wished. On average, both primary and secondary schools made two responses.

\* These are summarised in the text presented in Appendix 2, Table 1.

### ◆ *People involved*

One of the most important factors for both primary and secondary headteachers was the willingness and commitment of teachers in drawing up and implementing the action plan. Sometimes the whole staff was mentioned, sometimes it was particular teachers who had played key roles in the implementation process. Almost half the primary headteachers (46 per cent) and a third of secondary headteachers (34 per cent) mentioned this aspect. The role played by the governors was also perceived to have been very important in helping implement the action plan – approximately a quarter of primary and secondary headteachers mentioned them specifically. Other facilitating factors that headteachers mentioned here included: the importance of new members of staff/new headteacher; the importance of involving the whole staff; and the helpfulness of parents (Appendix 2, Table 1).

### ◆ *Understanding of issues/process of action planning*

Another important factor in implementing the action plan, particularly among secondary schools, was the fact that the school had already identified many of the key areas for improvement through their existing SDP. Forty-one per cent of secondary headteachers (more than the proportion that referred to the positive influence of staff) and 28 per cent of primary headteachers made this point. Other important factors were felt to be general acceptance among staff that the key issues identified by inspectors were appropriate; that the action plan had clearly defined/attainable targets; that the key issues required only a limited amount of work; and that the time was ripe for change (Appendix 2, Table 1).

### ◆ *Staffing arrangements*

Within this general category of staffing arrangements, aspects that were mentioned as being helpful in facilitating the action plan included: good management structures in place (seven per cent of primary headteachers, 12 per cent of secondary headteachers), new staffing arrangements, including changed roles and responsibilities for certain staff (eight per cent of primary and seven per cent of secondary headteachers) and delegation of the work or responsibility to other members of staff/governors (six per cent of primary and nine per cent of secondary) (Appendix 2, Table 1).

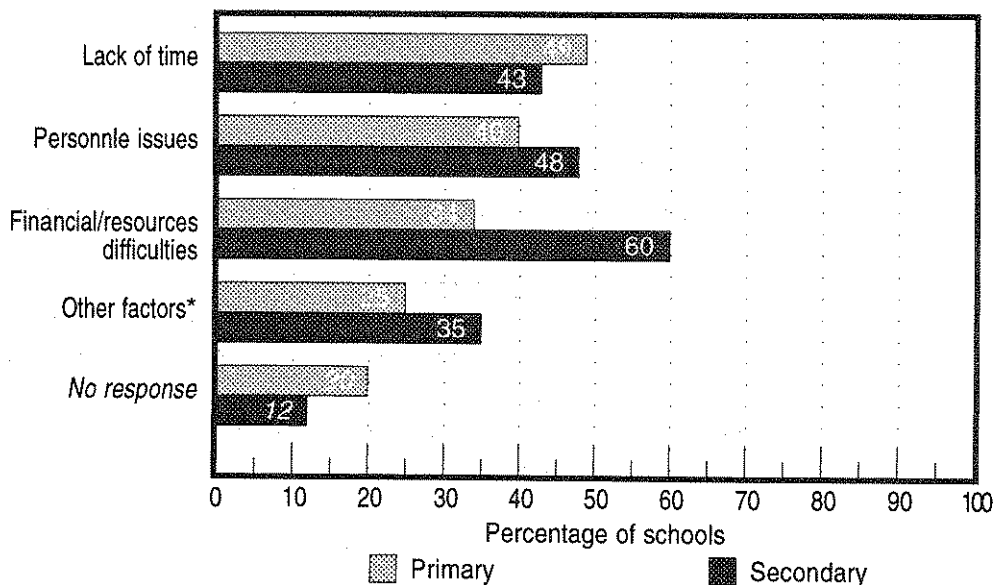
◆ **External expertise**

Many more primary headteachers seem to have relied on external expertise to aid in the implementation of their action plan. Twenty-nine per cent of them said that the support, advice or monitoring they received from their LEA was an important factor in facilitating the implementation of the action plan. Thirteen per cent of secondary headteachers made similar comments. Also, INSET courses were of far greater importance to the implementation of action plans in primary schools than in secondary schools (22 per cent of primary schools, compared with four per cent of secondary schools) (Appendix 2, Table 1).

**What factors *hinder* the implementation of action plans?**

Headteachers were invited to list up to five of the main factors that they felt *hindered* the implementation of their action plan. A summary of their responses is presented in Figure 8. The first group of problems related to limited time available. The second group of problems revolved around personnel issues. A third common difficulty was that of financial/resource problems: this was found to be very important to secondary schools, and much less important to primary schools. The main aspects arising within each of these broad areas are described in the following paragraphs (Appendix 2, Table 2 gives full details).

**Figure 8** Main factors *hindering* implementation of action plan



Percentages are based on the number of schools that completed a questionnaire: primary N = 115; secondary N = 98.

This question allowed respondents to make as many responses as they wished. On average, both primary and secondary schools made two responses.

\* These are summarised in the text presented in Appendix 2, Table 2.

### ◆ *Lack of time*

A quarter of all headteachers said that the general lack of time was a major factor hindering the implementation of their action plan (Appendix 2, Table 2). A further 12 per cent of primary headteachers and eight per cent of secondary headteachers said that it was difficult to address aspects in the action plan at the same time as managing the day-to-day work of the school. Also, around ten per cent of headteachers felt that there were other more urgent priorities in the school – for example those already specified in the SDP – which meant that some elements in the action plan were difficult to address. Another consideration relating to lack of time, particularly in primary schools, was the fact that teachers, and in some cases headteachers, did not have enough non-contact time to work on implementing the action plan (13 per cent of primary schools and six per cent of secondary schools). Also, six per cent of primary schools found that there was little time for meetings between staff and with governors (Appendix 2, Table 2).

### ◆ *Personnel difficulties*

Approximately 20 per cent of secondary headteachers and ten per cent of primary headteachers found that some or all of their staff were unwilling to address specific key issues in the action plan, either because they did not agree with the proposed changes, or because they attached low priority to them. Other staffing problems that were raised in the context of difficulties in implementing the action plan included: low staffing levels in the school; staff absence; changes of staff or changes in staff responsibilities; low staff morale following inspection; lack of understanding on the part of staff and/or governors as to why change was needed; and lack of parental support on some aspects (Appendix 2, Table 2).

### ◆ *Financial/resource problems*

More than half the secondary headteachers and more than a third of primary headteachers said that they had insufficient budget and/or resources to implement some of the key issues in their action plan. In addition, almost 20 per cent of secondary headteachers said they had insufficient space/accommodation to address some of the issues (no primary schools mentioned this aspect). About ten per cent of secondary headteachers also commented on the absence of any financial support from their LEA/FAS or OFSTED to implement their action plan (Appendix 2, Table 2).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Since these schools were inspected, new procedures have been introduced regarding the reallocation of GEST funding to inspected schools.

◆ **Other factors hindering implementation**

A large number of other hindering factors were listed by headteachers, some of which raise potentially important considerations even though the numbers of headteachers mentioning them were very low. These include: the inability of schools to find specialist advice for certain of their key issues; schools' difficulty in understanding some key issues and lack of advice from OFSTED inspectors about how to address these;<sup>5</sup> the sheer amount of change necessary to implement the whole action plan within the four-year inspection cycle; difficulty of measuring whether some key issues have in fact been implemented (e.g. regarding the quality of teaching); and finally, factors outside the school's control such as LEA reorganisation, the wider social context in which the school operates, or parental attitudes (Appendix 2, Table 2).

## What extra resources are needed to implement action plans?

Headteachers were asked to indicate what, if any, extra resources were needed to meet targets specified in the school action plan. A tick-list of resources was provided for this purpose. (Figure 9 gives full details of the responses made.)

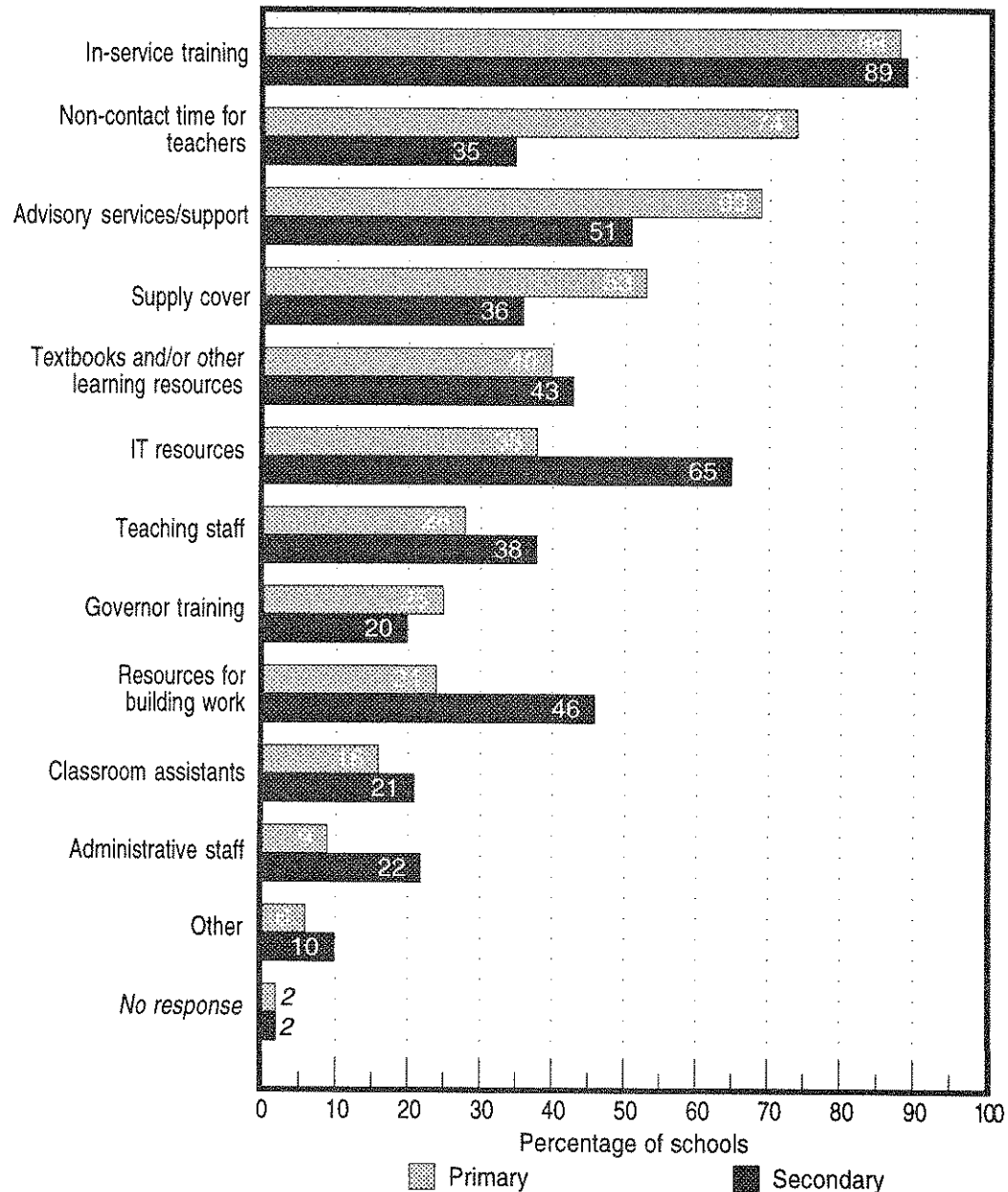
By far the single most common resource implication contained in school action plans related to *in-service training*, with almost 90 per cent of primary and secondary headteachers declaring that this was needed to meet action plan targets. Probably related to this aspect, almost 70 per cent of primary schools and approximately 50 per cent of secondary schools indicated that *advisory services/support* was needed. This obviously has important implications for LEA advisory services in terms of planning their support for the different sectors. Also, just over half of responding primary schools and around one-third of responding secondary schools indicated a need for *supply cover* to meet targets specified in their school's action plan.

Other resource implications also emerged strongly, though different levels of response to particular aspects suggested different priorities in the different sectors. For example, among primary schools, the second most common resource issue was the need for *non-contact time for teachers*, with 74 per cent of them ticking this category (35 per cent of secondary headteachers ticked this category).

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that it is not within the inspectors' remit to offer such advice to schools.

Conversely, almost two-thirds of secondary schools mentioned the need for IT resources, while just over one-third of primary schools mentioned this as a need related to their action plan targets. Resources for building work were needed in almost half the secondary schools in order to meet targets identified, while in primary schools approximately a quarter said this was the case.

**Figure 9 Most common additional resources needed to meet targets specified in school action plans**



Percentages are based on the number of schools that completed a questionnaire:  
 primary N = 115; secondary N = 98.

This question allowed respondents to tick as many categories as applied. On average, both primary headteachers made five responses; secondary headteachers made four responses.

## Costing the extra resources needed

Almost three-quarters of primary and secondary schools indicated that their action plan included costings for some or all of the additional resources they would require to implement it. However, many schools, particularly secondary schools, had only included costings for *some*, rather than all, the resources they needed to implement their plan.

Headteachers were invited to make further comment on costings in their action plan. Not surprisingly, a wide range of topics emerged, but some aspects were mentioned more commonly than others and these are briefly touched on here. Many primary headteachers (31 per cent) raised the issue of the cost of supply cover for their teachers to have non-contact time in order to tackle aspects raised in the action plan. Not surprisingly, far fewer secondary headteachers mentioned this aspect. The cost of buying in advisers' time was also mentioned by some primary schools. Two other aspects that were mentioned by many primary headteachers were the cost of INSET to implement the action plan, and the need to purchase additional curriculum materials (each mentioned by around 20 per cent of primary headteachers). Just under 20 per cent of secondary headteachers also mentioned the cost of INSET required to implement their action plan. The other aspect they commonly raised was the cost of IT equipment. Finally, around ten per cent of all headteachers mentioned that the resource implications of the action plan were not too problematic, because many of the key issues for action had already been anticipated and were included in the SDP.

## What support is needed to implement the action plan?

### ◆ *Financial support*

Very few schools (around ten per cent of primary and around 15 per cent of secondary) received financial support from their LEA (or FAS) to help implement their action plan. Headteachers were invited to comment on this aspect if they wished. Although very little common ground was covered, some of the comments made by headteachers appear to be of note. Some schools that did receive funding were unhappy that it was insufficient, or did not cover all of the costs involved in implementing a particular part of their action plan. Others were dissatisfied with the fact that GEST funding had recently become available for inspected schools but they themselves were not eligible, having been inspected in the previous academic year. A number of headteachers said they had put their school forward to take part in special initiatives purely as a way of securing additional funding for part of their action plan



proposals. Many headteachers said they had tried and failed to obtain extra funding, for example, from their LEA, the FAS, GEST funding, or from DFEE.

◆ **Advice and training support**

The survey showed a notable degree of LEA involvement in the implementation stage of action plans: sixty-eight per cent of primary headteachers and 55 per cent of secondary headteachers said that they received advice and support from their own LEA personnel regarding the implementation of the action plan. This is despite a reduction in LEA advisory services for schools over recent years (Dean, 1993 and 1994; Mann, 1995).

**Table 4 Training for staff and governors to help implement the action plan**

TYPE OF TRAINING	STAFF TRAINING		GOVERNOR TRAINING	
	Primary %	Secondary %	Primary %	Secondary %
LEA training only	57	30	38	20
Non-LEA training only	9	13	1	6
Combination of LEA and non-LEA training	17	32	1	2
<b>TOTAL</b> (Schools providing any training)	83	75	40	28
<i>No response</i>	17*	25*	60*	72*
<b>OVERALL TOTAL</b>	100	100	100	100

*Percentages are based on the number of schools that completed a questionnaire: primary N = 115; secondary N = 98.*

*\* The high 'no response' could be due to the design of the question – schools may not have completed certain sections because they did not provide such training.*

The majority of primary and secondary schools reported that their staff and governors had received in-service training to help implement their action plan, although to varying degrees (Table 4).

In 83 per cent of primary schools and 75 per cent of secondary schools, in-service training was provided in order to help staff address targets in the action plan. In primary schools, this tended to be training provided by the LEA (57 per cent of schools); however, secondary schools were more evenly divided between those that used a combination of LEA and non-LEA training and those that chose LEA training only (32 per cent and 30 per cent respectively).

Training for governors was less common: four out of ten primary and three out of ten secondary headteachers said that their governors had received training to help implement the action plan. Again, the majority of primary schools favoured training provided by the

LEA, as did secondary schools in this case. Where governors received training, this was usually in schools where staff had also received training; very few schools reported that *only* governors had received training.

## How do schools monitor the implementation of their action plan?

Virtually all schools (primary 96 per cent, secondary 94 per cent) had their own internal procedures to monitor the implementation of the action plan (Table 5). Primary headteachers indicated two main methods of monitoring within the school: just over half (52 per cent) used feedback to governors as a way of monitoring progress on their action plan; in one in three schools, particular staff or committees involved with specific key issues were given responsibility for monitoring each of these. Secondary schools, on the other hand, mentioned a number of methods of internal monitoring. The most common, as with the primary sector, was feedback to governors (47 per cent), followed by one in three schools using the senior management team to monitor progress of the plan and a similar proportion indicating that the monitoring of their action plan was built in to their SDP. A quarter of schools relied on particular staff and committees to monitor specific key issues.

**Table 5 Existence of procedures to monitor the implementation of the action plan**

MONITORING PROCEDURES	INTERNAL		EXTERNAL	
	Primary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary
	%	%	%	%
Yes	96	94	34	19
No	3	4	15	28
No response	1	2	51*	53*
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

Percentages are based on the number of schools that completed a questionnaire: primary N = 115; secondary N = 98.

\* As this was a 'yes/no' question, it is not clear why there was such a large non response under the heading of external procedures.

In addition to this, one in three primary schools and one in five secondary schools had set up *external* monitoring arrangements. This tended to be monitoring or review by an LEA inspector or adviser (27 per cent of primary schools and 15 per cent of secondary schools). A few schools (three per cent of primary and secondary) employed external consultants to monitor and review their action plans.

## 7. OUTCOMES OF ACTION PLANNING

How has the process of action planning affected schools? To what extent have schools implemented their action plans? Have other factors taken precedence? What impact have the implemented action plans had? Do headteachers feel that the process and outcomes have been beneficial? In this final section on the questionnaire survey data, the answers to these questions are explored.

### How far have schools implemented their action plans?

Schools participating in this survey had undergone inspection at least one and a half terms earlier. This meant that before the survey took place they had time to complete the process of action planning and begin the process of implementation. In order to assess the extent to which action plans were leading to changes in schools, headteachers were asked to indicate alongside each of their school's key issues whether the key issue had been *substantially* implemented, *partly* implemented, or *not yet begun*. Before examining their responses, two points ought to be raised. First, it would be quite wrong to make any assumptions about the comparability of individual key issues – obviously some have far greater implications (in terms of their cost, time and/or staffing) than others. Thus a school that has implemented all of its key issues is not *necessarily* doing better than a school that has implemented only half of its key issues. Secondly, assessing the extent of implementation is obviously not straightforward – particularly where elapsed time is a necessary part of the process – and so *partial* implementation is not necessarily worse than *substantial* implementation. It is important to bear these two considerations in mind when looking at the following data.

Virtually all schools had begun to implement most of their key issues, as can be seen from Table 6. To be specific, just under two-thirds of primary schools and over half of secondary schools had started to implement *all* of their key issues. Furthermore, over a third of schools had started to implement *more than half* of their key issues.

**Table 6** Proportion of key issues schools have *started* to implement

KEY ISSUES STARTED	Primary %	Secondary %
All started	64	57
More than half started	36	40
Up to half started	0	2
None started	0	1
TOTAL	100	100

Percentages are based on the number of schools that provided a complete response to this question: primary N = 109; secondary N = 88.

N.B. The proportions in this table were calculated by the research team, not headteachers.

However, as Table 7 shows, hardly any schools had '*substantially implemented*' *all* of their key issues for action (five per cent of primary and no secondary schools). By far the largest group – more than half the primary and secondary schools that responded – had '*substantially implemented*' *up to half* of their key issues.

About a third of primary and secondary schools indicated that they had some key issues that they had not yet started. This usually applied to only one or two key issues, from an average of between six (primary) and seven (secondary) key issues (Table 8). Finally, 18 per cent of secondary schools, and 11 per cent of primary schools, had not '*substantially implemented*' *any* of their key issues for action at the time of returning their questionnaire. Further analysis of the data showed that, among secondary schools, the more favourable their view was of their inspection report, the more likely they were *not* to have started implementing key issues.

**Table 7** Proportion of key issues schools have *substantially* implemented

KEY ISSUES IMPLEMENTED	Primary %	Secondary %
All substantially implemented	5	0
More than half substantially implemented	26	24
Up to half substantially implemented	58	58
Less than half substantially implemented	11	18
TOTAL	100	100

Percentages are based on the number of schools that provided a complete response to this question: primary N = 109; secondary N = 88.

N.B. The proportions in this table were calculated by the research team, not headteachers.

**Table 8** Number of key issues schools have *not yet started*

KEY ISSUES NOT STARTED	Primary %	Secondary %
One key issue	30	20
Two key issues	6	16
Three or more key issues	0	7
Not applicable (i.e. all started)	64	57
TOTAL	100	100

*Percentages are based on the number of schools that provided a complete response to this question: primary N = 109; secondary N = 88.*

## How much interest have parents shown in the school's action plan?

Approximately eight out of ten primary headteachers and seven out of ten secondary headteachers reported little or no parental interest in the action planning phase of the inspection. Some headteachers mentioned that special meetings had been held specifically to inform/consult with parents, and in several secondary schools these were organised by the parent/teacher association. Others indicated that parents had been kept informed of the action plan's progress via the school notice board, or through sending documentation home.<sup>6</sup>

In only a very small number of schools, parents were reported to have shown some interest in the action plan. Sometimes this was over specific action points, such as the need for more resources. In other schools, parents had become involved in fund-raising efforts to meet certain objectives in the plan.

<sup>6</sup> Schools are required to provide all parents with a copy of the action plan and to report subsequently on its implementation at the annual governors' meeting.

## How does the action plan relate to the school development plan?

Since the introduction of school development planning in the mid-to-late 1980s (Fidler, 1996b), it is common practice now for schools to produce SDPs (Mortimore *et al.*, 1994), particularly since the delegation of school budgets under the local management of schools. Most schools use a yearly cycle of development planning, identifying a small number of priorities to be addressed during the coming year, as part of the school's longer-term development plan.

As part of this NFER survey, headteachers were asked to comment on this aspect. A very strong connection between post-inspection action plans and SDPs emerged: approximately six out of ten headteachers said that their school's action plan had been incorporated into the SDP (primary 59 per cent, secondary 65 per cent). On the other hand, in around one in ten secondary schools, the headteacher reported that the action plan and the SDP remained separate documents, often with different priorities.

However, around 15 per cent of primary and secondary headteachers said that, in practice, merging their action plan and SDP had meant very little change to the SDP because key issues for action from the inspection had already been identified by the school prior to the inspection. The fact that relatively few headteachers reported this situation augurs well for school improvement through inspection. Research conducted on behalf of BEMAS (Ouston *et al.*, 1996) (see Introduction) found that in schools with only a moderate overlap between the action plan and the SDP, a more positive attitude towards school development was identified than in schools where most key issues had already been targeted in the SDP prior to inspection.

Finally, some headteachers made further comments in response to this question, from which it is possible to detect indications of subtle changes in their approaches to *school development* planning, possibly arising as a direct result of participating in post-inspection *action* planning. Three main areas of improvement emerged. (While each of these aspects was mentioned by fewer than 20 per cent of headteachers, it should be borne in mind that these data are based on open-ended, additional comments.) First, some headteachers felt that school development planning had become *more focused* as a result of action planning; the whole process had

been rationalised in some way. Secondly, the action plan was felt by some to have provided a *useful framework* for the school's SDP, making the latter easier to produce now – some schools had adopted a new format for their SDP. Thirdly, the whole process of action planning had led to changes in the way in which schools involved staff or governors in the planning process. New procedures had emerged with regard to planning, implementation and/or monitoring.

### What are headteachers' views on the impact of inspection and action planning?

Headteachers were invited to give their views on the impact of inspection and action planning on their schools. All but three primary headteachers took the opportunity to comment. What emerged was a strong feeling that, for most schools, the whole process of inspection and action planning had led to some important positive outcomes.

On the negative side, a few headteachers – around one in ten primary and two in ten secondary – said that neither inspection nor the action plan had made any difference to their school. A similar proportion of headteachers commented that there had been little or no change because the action plan had addressed the same issues as were already outlined in their SDP. Also, some said that the inspection had resulted in low staff morale and increased staff stress – indeed it was suggested by some headteachers that the run-up to the inspection had led to a decline in the quality of teaching and increased staff absences. On a similar theme, some headteachers found that they had had to overcome staff's negative reactions to the inspection before they were able to address targets in the action plan. Other headteachers were unhappy that preparation for inspection and implementation of the action plan had delayed priorities identified in their SDP, while some felt that inspection and action planning were unable to affect the main difficulties faced by the school.

However, the vast majority of comments on the impact of inspection and action planning were positive. One aspect that was commonly mentioned was the improvement that had accrued in terms of the *staff morale or confidence*. Some headteachers mentioned that it had resulted in an increased '*sense of pride*' in the school. Others found that the whole process of preparing the school for the inspection and action planning had been useful in developing '*a*

*common purpose* among staff, or for *team-building*. Also, some headteachers felt that others involved with the school had benefited from this effect; in particular, governors and parents had become more aware of the positive aspects of the school, or become more involved with the school. Related to this issue, some headteachers suggested that the inspection process had been a useful way of *introducing change*, describing it as *a positive vehicle for change* or *a good management tool* allowing staff and governors to embrace change with a positive attitude. Some heads mentioned specific changes that might otherwise have been difficult, e.g. changes in the staffing structure or non-contact time for some staff.

Aspects relating to improvements in *teaching and learning* were also commonly mentioned. Over a quarter of primary headteachers said that the process of inspection and action planning had led to improvements in procedures relating to curriculum development, such as schemes of work and pupil assessment. In a few cases, other specific teaching and learning benefits were mentioned, such as raising awareness of the needs of certain groups of pupils, e.g. more able pupils, or those with learning difficulties.

A few headteachers found that inspection and action planning had been a useful lever in *securing more resources* for the school, or in *identifying where funding for resources was most needed*.

But by far the most common theme for responses, being raised by almost 40 per cent of primary and secondary headteachers, was that inspection had helped the school to *focus on what needed doing*. This was sometimes expressed in terms of having been useful in providing a *benchmark* or an opportunity to compare themselves against national *norms*. In a similar vein, a quarter of headteachers said that a very positive outcome of the inspection had been confirmation that the school was *on course*; some said this had renewed their determination to maintain present standards.



## 8. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which schools approach the task of action planning and to identify changes in policy and practice that result from the process of developing and implementing post-inspection action plans. This first report has provided an overview of the way in which schools approach the task of action planning, and the factors that help and hinder this process. The follow-up report to this one, based on detailed case studies of ten of the survey schools, will provide a more detailed analysis of the different perspectives of those involved in action planning, with particular emphasis on identifying good practice and strategies for tackling problems that arise.

The findings presented in this first report are based on questionnaire responses from over 200 primary and secondary schools in England. Overall, the impression of inspection and action planning from these schools was positive. Most of them had anticipated the inspection team's findings and felt that the key issues for action that inspectors identified were appropriate. Most schools drew up the action plan within the eight-week time limit specified by OFSTED and involved a wide range of people both within and outside the school in the process. Six months to a year on from inspection virtually all schools responding to the survey had begun the process of implementing their action plan – most were about half way, but some had made substantial progress. Also, almost all schools had set up internal arrangements for monitoring the progress of this implementation. Furthermore, virtually all schools reported positive benefits arising from the inspection and action planning, while hardly any indicated negative outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

### What were the key issues for action in schools?

Analysis of all the key issues for action specified in responding schools' inspection reports revealed 72 separate categories, encompassing all aspects of school provision (Appendix 1). On average, *primary schools* had six key issues for action. The most common theme was curriculum planning and delivery: almost 90 per cent of responding primary schools had been told they needed to improve some aspect connected with *curriculum planning*;

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<sup>7</sup> It can be assumed that these indications are broadly representative of schools that have been inspected, since even those that were selected as part of the random selection but did not participate in the study said that the reason for non-participation was general lack of time and too many questionnaire requests, rather than negative experiences of inspection.

slightly more than half of the primary schools had been advised that they needed to improve the *quality of teaching* (i.e. a general statement about the school); while a half of primary schools had been told to focus on the *quality of teaching in specific subjects*. Also, in many primary schools the key issues for action highlighted the need to *implement* or to *monitor the implementation* of the SDP or curriculum policies. Other common key issues for action in primary school inspection reports related to: the roles, responsibilities and training of staff; and pupil assessment procedures.

On average, *secondary schools* had seven key issues for action. Apart from the need to meet statutory requirements,<sup>8</sup> the most common theme was school development planning, with two-thirds of secondary schools being told they needed to improve this generally, or to address specific aspects of it. In particular, as in many primary school inspections, inspectors had often pointed to the need to ensure that policies contained in the SDP and other documentation were actually being implemented. Several other themes were all common in secondary schools' inspection reports: staff roles/responsibility/training; pupil assessment; pupil attendance/welfare/guidance; the teaching in specific subjects; provision/resources; quality of teaching generally (i.e. not subject-specific); and school organisation.

Obviously these aspects, framed as 'key issues for action', are central to the successful operation of schools. It should follow then that OFSTED inspections, in drawing the attention of the whole school community to the need for development in these areas, are providing an important service and fulfilling a vital role. Certainly, many of the headteachers felt that the process of inspection *had* been useful in drawing their attention to what needed doing and in providing a useful 'benchmark' against which to compare the school in the national context. On the other hand, it was also the case that the vast majority of headteachers felt that most of the issues identified by OFSTED inspections were ones that they not only found 'appropriate', but had also 'expected'.<sup>9</sup> Indeed many had already identified in their SDP the issues that came up in inspection reports. That being so, it is right to consider the extent to which progress and improvements made by schools can be attributed to the process of inspection and, in particular, the action plans which result. If through their own school development planning schools had identified the issues for action, which the inspection appeared in many cases only to have confirmed, did the

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<sup>8</sup> The single most common 'key issue for action' among secondary schools, affecting 70 per cent of those studied, was the need to comply with the statutory requirement to provide for all pupils a daily act of collective worship.

<sup>9</sup> Over half the headteachers in the survey felt that at least half of their school's key issues for action had been 'expected', and a similar proportion of headteachers felt that at least half of the key issues were 'appropriate'. Proportions were calculated by the project team, not headteachers.

inspection take the school any further? It would appear that the answer was, in most cases, yes. First, the inspection almost always raised some issues that the school had not identified for itself. Secondly, despite feeling that they had identified many of the issues already, many headteachers said that the inspection had been useful in helping them to focus on what needed doing; indeed it is possible that in some schools issues only became 'expected' as a result of the process of preparing for an inspection. Thirdly, in a number of schools the inspection report identified as a key issue for action the need to ensure that implementation of the SDP and other policies was in fact taking place. Therefore, it seems likely that even where schools had identified similar priorities to those arising from inspection, the whole process of inspection and action planning acted as a spur to implementation.

### How do schools draw up their action plan?

Most schools started the action planning process either immediately after the oral feedback from inspectors or just after receiving the written report. Virtually all completed it within the allotted time scale of eight weeks. However, around a quarter of schools started action planning *before* the inspection. Possibly the preparation for an inspection started their planning process (Matthews and Smith, 1995, p.26), or perhaps they saw the action planning arising from inspection as part of an ongoing process of school development planning – particularly if the inspection report raised issues that the school had already identified in its SDP (see later section on the link between action plans and SDPs).

Schools saw action planning as a collaborative process, usually involving a number of different people. The extent to which real discussion occurred and influenced what was actually written in the action plan must of course depend on the headteacher's skills of delegation and abilities to motivate and involve colleagues. Headteachers themselves almost always had a key role in actually drafting the action plan; indeed in three out of ten primary schools the headteacher took sole responsibility for the actual writing. The follow-up report to this one, which is based on case studies in a small number of schools, will explore the process of drafting action plans in detail, providing insight into whether teachers felt that the process of action planning had actually changed the way they worked or how the school operated generally.

Primary headteachers more often reported difficulties in drawing up the action plan than secondary headteachers. Most commonly, this related to personnel issues, in particular, difficulties in terms of inadequate supply cover and non-contact time. Another factor

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related to problems in interpreting the key issues themselves and developing action points from them. The need for support and advice was also connected with this (see the following section for more details).

## **To what extent are schools implementing action plans?**

Obviously the process of action planning is not an end in itself. Unless implementation takes place, the ultimate goal of inspection – to improve education – cannot be achieved. Schools must therefore be willing and able to implement their action plans. Six months to a year on from inspection, all schools in the study had begun the process of implementation, and most had addressed about half of their key issues for action. What aspects had helped or hindered them in implementing their action plans? Not surprisingly, the greatest influence was found to be the feelings of the teachers in the school. This worked both ways: the commitment and willingness of staff to make the changes was felt by headteachers to be by far the greatest asset in implementing the action plan; on the other hand, one of the main factors hindering implementation of some action points was the reluctance of staff. Where teachers were reluctant, this was commonly reported to be because they did not agree with specific recommendations in the inspection report – either because they felt these were already being implemented and that the inspection team had not seen the full picture, or because they felt that certain recommendations were inappropriate for their school.

Other vital factors were linked to this pivotal role of teachers in implementing action plans. Not surprisingly, one of the main difficulties identified by headteachers was the real problem of finding enough time to address yet another set of priorities. In some cases this related to the lack of non-contact time or supply cover for staff to attend to matters allocated to them in the action plan; in others it was the difficulty of prioritising a range of competing tasks within the overall context of continuing with the day-to-day work of the school. While this finding is neither startling or new (Fidler, 1996b), it is essential that it be taken seriously by heads and governing bodies in managing time and setting priorities. Also, those at strategic and policy level, having set up this system of four-yearly inspections, need to allow schools the time to address the individual priorities identified through inspection.

Training and development was another important factor in implementing action plans: over three-quarters of responding schools indicated that staff received in-service training in order to

help implement the action plan. In some schools, governors were also given training to help implement the action plan. Despite a reduction in most LEA advisory teams in recent years, there was widespread evidence that their services had played a crucial part in the implementation process. Some schools also brought in other external consultants for some of the training or advice that was needed to implement the post-inspection action plan. The scope of the questionnaire survey did not enable further examination of the types of training that were most in demand, though the follow-up report to this one will provide more information on this aspect. What did emerge, however, was a clear indication that schools, particularly in the primary phase, relied on their LEAs to provide the back-up and support that they felt they needed to act on the recommendations in the inspection report. Jarman (1996) also found that there was greater demand, in general, for LEA advisory services from primary schools. He found that despite this, most LEA advisory services at the time were geared towards the secondary sector. If this is still the case, then certainly there are implications for LEA advisory services to consider in terms of the nature of their team structure and focus of their services.

Related to this issue of support and advice, some headteachers expressed their frustration that the OFSTED inspectors themselves could not fulfil more of an advisory function after the inspection. It was clear that the majority were very happy with the oral feedback they received from OFSTED inspectors at the end of the inspection, prior to receiving the written report, and most felt that the written report was also a useful planning tool. However, there was a general feeling that more advice on how to proceed would have been useful, particularly from the team that actually carried out the inspection. In the absence of this, some were uncertain how to address some of the key issues for action that inspectors had identified. Currently this is not something that inspectors are allowed to do; their remit is to carry out the inspection, *not* offer advice. Indeed, part of the Government's intention in introducing the new system of inspections was specifically to separate inspection from advice.

### **Are there resource implications?**

This study found that there were usually very clear resource implications arising from inspections. Again, the main emphasis was on the need for staff development and advice: *90 per cent of primary and secondary headteachers indicated that in-service training for staff was needed to implement the action plan.* Many schools felt they needed to purchase the services of their LEA advisory team to provide advice, support and/or training. Also,

non-contact time and supply cover were found to be necessary to allow teachers time to address some of the targets in the action plan. Not surprisingly, this latter resource issue was more common in primary schools, where non-contact time for staff was usually very limited, and often the headteacher also had teaching commitments.

Purchasing INSET from LEAs and other consultants was expensive for schools, particularly if they needed to meet the cost of the training as well as the cost of supply cover to release staff from their teaching duties. Only around ten per cent of primary schools and 15 per cent of secondary schools in this study received any financial support from their LEA or FAS to meet the costs of implementing their action plan. Some headteachers explained that, as a result of financial constraints, the key issues that *had* been implemented were the ones that had little or no cost/resource implications. Others said that without access to any additional resources it was impossible to specify a time scale for the implementation of some key issues in their action plan. However, a few headteachers said they had been able to implement their action plan because they had fortunately got a 'healthy' budget, while some had deliberately carried money over from the previous year in preparation for the inspection.

Since these schools were inspected, new GEST arrangements have been introduced for reallocating funding annually to schools that are to be inspected that year. However, whether these new procedures will solve the resourcing implications of implementing action plans is an area that will require examination.

### **Is there a link between post-inspection action planning and school development planning?**

A major factor associated with the implementation of action plans was the extent to which schools were already familiar with the process of school development planning. First, some schools found that because the internal 'structures' were already in place, this facilitated the implementation of the post-inspection action plan. Secondly, prior to the inspection, some schools had identified in their SDP many of the key issues for action raised in the inspection. This meant that they had already decided on the strategies to employ, and, in some cases, had made arrangements for the funding that would be needed. Linked to these aspects, most schools said that their action plan and SDP had been merged to make just one working document. There were signs that where this was not the case, competing priorities existed between the two documents.

Findings from this questionnaire survey revealed that in secondary schools, the more favourable the headteacher perceived the inspection report to be, the less likely it was that progress had been made in implementing the key issues. On the face of it, this seems surprising; it might have been expected that a report perceived as being positive would be more encouraging than one perceived as being negative. One explanation for this may be a degree of complacency brought about by having a favourable report – a feeling that there is no urgency to implement the recommendations for action. Alternatively, schools that perceived their report to be favourable may have decided to continue addressing their own priorities for development before those in their action plan, believing these to be more important, or perhaps, that it was not sensible to break off into a new realm of development before completing existing targets that were already under way. Also, it was not uncommon in inspection reports to have key issues for action that appeared to require *no* action; for example ‘continue to maintain the high standards currently being achieved in [a specific aspect/subject]’. Schools indicated difficulties in knowing how to address such key issues in their action plan – could they claim that by not changing anything they had implemented the key issue? While it is right that inspectors should applaud and encourage good practice, it hardly seems appropriate to use the ‘key issue *for action*’ section of the report to do this.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Since this research was undertaken, the revised OFSTED framework for inspections has addressed this issue and inspectors are discouraged from doing this.

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## OVERVIEW

The findings from this survey suggest that schools have taken on board the need for school development planning, of which post-inspection action planning is seen as just one part. However, there are indications that schools need much greater support after an inspection in order to draw up and implement their action plans. First, most headteachers clearly indicated a need for support and advice for themselves and their teachers to help them draw up their first action plan. Moreover, in order to make progress in addressing the action points identified in that plan, further support and in-service training for teachers were felt to be vital components that were currently lacking in the whole inspection process. Given that the remit of OFSTED inspectors is *not* to provide advice on how to act on the specific points they raise, schools are likely to continue to look to their LEAs and other external consultants to provide this service, *if* they can afford to pay for it. A second, related issue, is the need for other resources, apart from INSET, to support change in schools. A general lack of time, compounded by inadequate supply cover and limited funds/resources, was also an important factor hindering the implementation process.

The majority of headteachers found inspection a positive experience. While it seems that it often confirmed aspects of the school that headteachers already recognised as key issues for action, it was usually found to have been helpful in focusing their thinking on these issues, as well as highlighting some that had not been identified. However, it seems that the potential benefits to be had from what is obviously a very costly system of school inspections may not be being fully realised. Despite the positive impression of inspection that emerged, many headteachers felt they had been left with insufficient advice, support, training and resources to tackle all the key issues for action that the inspection had identified.



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# APPENDIX 1

**Table 1. Key issues for action in inspection reports (reported by headteachers)**

	Primary	Secondary
<i>a. Curriculum planning</i>	%	%
Develop/review curriculum planning (general)	32	10
Develop schemes of work	35	1
Introduce/review the role of curriculum coordinator(s)	29	7
Improve whole school curriculum plan	18	3
Improve learning objectives/guidelines for progression	13	1
Improve departmental planning	13	3
Introduce/review curriculum policies for specific subjects and/or age-groups	10	17
<i>b. School development planning</i>		
Improve procedures for monitoring implementation of SDP, curriculum policies etc.	27	42
Improve school development planning (general)	26	24
Introduce/strengthen link between SDP and school budget	13	7
Improve staff and/or governor involvement in SDP process	4	0
Identify/review school aims and objectives	4	3
Address issues related to the pace of change	0	3
Improve policy writing	3	0
<i>c. Curriculum delivery</i>		
Improve quality of teaching (general)	31	24
Address the needs of more able pupils	16	10
Improve teaching for younger pupils	10	0
Improve classroom management	8	2
Improve SEN work	5	8
Improve homework arrangements	0	4
<i>d. Subject-specific</i>		
Information technology (IT)	23	8
Cultural and/or personal and social education (PSE)	11	21
English, reading and/or oracy	10	14
Religious education	8	1
Mathematics/numeracy	8	12
Design technology	7	3
History and/or geography	7	0
Science	6	2
Physical education (PE)	5	0
Art	5	1
Music	2	3
Modern foreign languages	0	8
Core subjects	4	2

	Primary	Secondary
<b>e. Roles/responsibilities/training</b>	%	%
Extend good teaching practice to whole school/improve consistency in quality of teaching (i.e. between teachers)	14	24
Improve staff development/subject specialist knowledge	13	9
Introduce/clarify/provide training for specific management role(s)	16	22
Develop governors' involvement in school management	9	4
Introduce/improve staff appraisal procedures	0	4
<b>f. Pupil achievement</b>		
Maintain present standards of achievement/quality of education (general comment)	20	9
Raise standards of achievement/address underachievement	10	31
<b>g. Pupil assessment</b>		
Improve pupil assessment practices	23	35
Use pupil assessment to plan future learning	14	5
Introduce/improve marking policy	3	5
Improve pupils' self assessment	3	4
Improve external examination policy/arrangements	0	5
<b>h. Pastoral issues</b>		
Maintain school's ethos (e.g. continuance of emphasis on moral, spiritual and/or cultural development of pupils)	15	4
Introduce/review behaviour policy	10	4
Improve home/school links	8	8
Address aspects relating to pupil attendance (e.g. truancy, punctuality, registers)	4	31
Introduce/review pastoral care arrangements	0	7
<b>i. Meeting statutory requirements</b>		
Improve/increase acts of collective worship (in order to 'meet statutory requirements')	13	70
Ensure all national curriculum requirements are being met	4	17
Maintain attendance registers to meet stat. requirements	3	6
Ensure statutory requirements are being met (general comment)	0	5
<b>j. Provision/resources</b>		
Improve IT provision (i.e. facilities and/or use of IT across the curriculum)	4	17
Improve/review library provision	4	10
Improve provision of support for SEN pupils	4	11
Improve play equipment for younger pupils	3	0
Improve resources (general comment)	3	8
Make better use of outdoor facilities	2	0
Improve provision of non-teaching support	2	1
Make better use of library resources	0	2
Improve system for allocating resources to departments	0	3

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	Primary	Secondary
<b><i>k. Organisation issues</i></b>	%	%
Address specific accommodation issues	10	24
Review length of school day/timetabling efficiency	6	18
Improve pupil grouping arrangements	0	10
Introduce/improve links with business/industry/commerce	0	1
Review/improve sixth form provision	0	9
<b><i>l. Health and safety issues</i></b>		
Improve aspects relating to health and safety (e.g. within science laboratories, workshop equipment, school cleaning arrangements)	9	26
<b><i>m. Budgeting and administration</i></b>		
Improve budgeting arrangements (e.g. improve cost-effectiveness, review financial procedures, balance the budget)	11	9
Increase administrative support	1	1
Other administrative issues	3	1
<b>TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>98</b>

*Primary schools: the number of key issues for action ranged between three and ten, with an average of approximately six key issues per school.*

*Secondary schools: the number of key issues ranged between three and thirteen, with an average of approximately seven key issues per school.*

*Percentages are based on the number of schools that completed a questionnaire: primary N = 115; secondary N = 98. Percentages exceed 100 as respondents listed several key issues.*

## APPENDIX 2

**Table 1. Main factors *facilitating* implementation of action plan**

	Primary	Secondary
<i>People involved</i>	%	%
Willingness/commitment of staff	46	34
Willingness/commitment of governors	27	26
New head/staff	16	17
Whole staff involvement	12	6
Helpful parents	8	0
<i>Understanding/prior knowledge of key issues</i>		
Key areas already identified/addressed in SDP	28	41
Framework for implementation already existed	10	5
Action points required limited input for implementation	7	8
Time was ripe for change	0	8
General acceptance that key issues were appropriate	0	16
<i>External expertise</i>		
LEA advice/support/monitoring/review of implementation	29	13
INSET courses	22	4
Access to materials from SCAA/OFSTED re. action plans	2	0
<i>Staffing arrangements</i>		
Delegation of work/responsibilities for action points	6	9
Changes to staffing arrangements	8	7
Good management structures in place to aid development	7	12
<i>Financial</i>		
LEA funding received	8	4
GEST funding used	6	2
School had financial resources to implement change	4	4
No/few financial implications	2	0
Additional grant received	0	2
<i>Process of inspection</i>		
Good oral feedback from inspection team	4	19
High quality inspection/positive process	6	0
<i>Extra resources</i>		
Allocation of extra non-contact time to various staff	6	0
Resources/space available/acquired to implement change	2	9
<i>Monitoring</i>		
Development of formal monitoring policy	5	4

## APPENDICES

	Primary	Secondary
<i>Other facilitating factors</i>	%	%
Inspection process/fear of re-inspection	5	8
Adopting a uniform policy-writing format	2	0
Re-organising classes/pupils	1	3
Restructuring the curriculum	0	3
Grant-maintained status	0	3

TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	102	85
TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONSES	331	276

*Percentages are based on the number of schools that completed a questionnaire: primary N = 115; secondary N = 98. Percentages might exceed 100 because respondents could list as many factors as they wished.*

Table 2. Main factors *hindering* implementation of the action plan

	Primary	Secondary
<i>Lack of time</i>	%	%
Lack of time (general comment)	24	24
Lack of non-contact time	13	6
Too busy with day-to-day school work	12	8
Other existing priorities (e.g. SDP)	11	8
Limited time to meet other staff/governors	6	0
<i>Personnel issues</i>		
Lack of staff expertise/need for INSET	11	8
Low staffing levels	10	8
Staff/school disagree with specific key issues	9	17
Staff absence	8	3
Changes of staff and/or staff responsibilities	8	10
Low staff morale following inspection	7	8
Staff/governors unwilling to embrace change	4	9
Lack of parental support on specific issues	1	1
<i>Financial resources/external support</i>		
Insufficient budget/resources	34	53
Missed out on GEST funding	1	6
Lack of accommodation/space	0	17
Lack of LEA support	0	5
<i>Other hindering factors</i>		
Unexpected events needing to take priority	9	11
Too many key issues to address at once	7	10
Unable to find specialist advice for certain issues	4	1
Lack of clarity of specific key issues	3	4
Lack of advice from OFSTED on how to proceed	3	3
The wider context outside school's control (e.g. need social/cultural change, LEA re-organisation)	3	15
Issues relating to age-range of pupils	3	3
Difficult to measure the quality of teaching	1	0
<b>TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONSES</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>241</b>
<b>TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>87</b>

Percentages are based on the number of schools that completed a questionnaire: primary  $N = 115$ ; secondary  $N = 98$ . Percentages exceed 100 because respondents could list as many factors as they wished.



## APPENDIX 3

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## planning for action

### Part 1: A survey of schools' post-inspection action planning

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After an OFSTED inspection, schools have a maximum of 40 days to draw up an action plan. How do schools set about this task? What is their reaction to the inspection findings? Who draws up the action plan? Is it a collaborative process? What role do school governors play in action planning? Moreover, what happens once the action plan has been completed? How soon is it implemented? Are there resource and training implications? What role does the LEA play? What factors help or hinder schools in achieving the targets in their action plans? And, finally, what positive outcomes arise from inspection and action planning?

This report, based on the NFER's 15-month study of post-inspection action planning, sheds light on these key questions. Drawing on the experiences of more than 200 primary, middle and secondary schools nationwide, it describes the process and outcomes of post-inspection action planning. Some of the findings that emerged are:

- Ninety per cent of headteachers found the written OFSTED inspection report 'useful' or 'very useful' for planning purposes.
- Action plans usually took between three and six weeks to complete. However, approximately 20 per cent of primary and secondary schools took longer than the 40 days allowed to draw up the action plan.
- LEA advisers were involved in the action planning process in three-quarters of primary schools and more than half of secondary schools.
- In over three-quarters of schools, staff received in-service training to help them address targets in the school's action plan. Training for governors was less common, being reported by only about a third of schools.
- Between six months and a year on from inspection, only about a quarter of schools had substantially implemented more than half of the key issues for action.
- Almost all headteachers identified some positive outcomes from their experiences of inspection and action planning, while only one in five reported any negative outcomes.

With its refreshingly uncomplicated approach to reporting research findings, this book will have wide appeal for those involved in action planning, as well as for LEAs, OFSTED inspectors, and policy makers at all levels.

A second report will be published in summer 1997. It will focus in detail on individual experiences of action planning in ten schools - five primary and five secondary. Each stage of the action-planning process will be examined, from the different perspectives of headteachers, governors, curriculum coordinators and other teachers. The emphasis in this second report will be on providing information and guidance on good practice, which will assist schools when drawing up their own action plans.

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