

6 ANALYSIS OF LEA STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES IN RELATION TO NATIONAL PRIORITIES

6.1 Priority 1: Raising attainment in the early years towards the early learning goals and in primary education, especially in literacy and numeracy.

While the trend-line of pupil attainment at KS1 and KS2 is upward, the rate of improvement is somewhat disappointing: the attainment of Devon pupils during these key stages has shown no more than an increase which matches the national increase in attainment levels. While the 2001 KS2 results saw Devon “overtaking” one statistical neighbour LEA, there has been no closing of the gap between Devon attainment and the average attainment in neighbour LEAs.

Data relating to the quality of teaching in primary schools (5.3.4 in the Audit) and to Inspectors’ judgements about the quality of education provided and their overall judgement about primary schools each indicate a general pattern of relative strength, with Devon schools and teachers appearing to do better than either the national level or that of statistical neighbours. In significant aspects of schools’ work - pupils’ progress; teachers’ expectations, methods and organisations; teachers’ knowledge and understanding; teachers’ planning and the management of pupils - at KS1 Devon schools perform in line with statistical neighbours and a little ahead of the national level while at KS2 Devon schools perform ahead of both statistical neighbours and the national level. That leaves the quandary that the attainment of Devon pupils at KS1 and KS2, also, might be expected to be ahead of the national average and at least at the neighbour LEA average, rather than being at the national level and a little behind the neighbour LEA average. The programme of EDP activities aims to correct this attainment shortfall.

The great majority of Devon primary schools make good or satisfactory progress in English, Maths and Science, at both KS1 and KS2. Within the Literacy strategy the picture is broadly positive: at schools which have received intensive support (in which training is complemented by school-based support from consultants) attainment has increased on average by 20% since 1998, compared with an increase of 12% in all Devon schools. Overall, the attainment gap between reading and writing (at Level 2B and Level 3 at KS1 and at KS2) remains obstinately wide: the Literacy Consultants have concluded that there should be more systematic and challenging teaching at text and sentence level to raise attainment in writing closer to attainment in reading and mathematics. Further, there is the need to follow training into more schools than those which are supported intensively, while the EDP2 activity is also designed to ensure that more teachers embed good literacy practice into daily teaching, and to provide a more flexible training programme, since one conclusion drawn from the review of work to date is that training has not necessarily changed practice in schools.

Within the Numeracy strategy a weakness identified by Consultants relates to dissemination of good practice following subject knowledge courses, and (as in the case of literacy teaching) the need for follow-up work to ensure that training has an impact in terms of classroom practice. A further current weakness lies in identification of curricular targets, and in the process of monitoring and evaluation of mathematics as an embedded part of each school's yearly cycle.

While the Audit indicates that pupils at the great majority of Devon primary schools make good or satisfactory progress in English, Maths and Science, at both KS1 and KS2, the picture in ICT is of relative weakness, with 30% of schools at KS2 being deemed to be making poor progress. That position is admittedly less extreme than in either neighbour LEAs, or in England as a whole, but explains the EDP activity (1.5) aimed at raising attainment in this subject.

The high proportion of Devon schools which are two, three or four- teacher primary schools serving (often isolated) rural communities is both a strength and a weakness - a strength in terms of the school being at the heart of a distinctive rural community, but a potential weakness in terms of the ability of the small complement of teachers to cover subject specialisms, and to take the initiative in implementing national programmes - such as those relating to school sport; to health education or to the arts - or to other developments such as teaching about the non-featured religions included in the local Agreed Syllabus. There are also issues relating to the provision of a full range of opportunities to develop headteachers', teachers' and governors' management and leadership skills, and to teachers' professional development generally in an area in which independent sector providers are not well-established.

A further area of concern is the question of appointing and retaining high-calibre headteachers at small primary schools. There is much statistical and qualitative evidence which points to an increasing problem in this area. To this must be added growing concern about teacher supply which is common, to a varying degree, to all parts of the country. EDP Activity 1.10 provides a response to these points of concern.

In relation to the Foundation Curriculum, the working of the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership in Devon is seen as a strength. There is a good geographical spread of non-maintained settings and in most rural areas there are strong links between settings and the local primary school. There are underlying concerns about the means of securing quality assurance and the required level of support for SENCOs in the large number (421) of non-maintained settings across the County, and the uneven spread of maintained sector nursery provision adds to the challenge. The establishment of a team of Foundation Stage advisory teachers by September 2002 (Activity 1.1) is aimed at extending quality assurance across all settings. Coherent SEN networks are also being developed (Activity 1.2). A recurrent concern is that there should be early identification and support for very young children who are at risk of social and educational exclusion. There has been an increase in the number of exclusions from primary schools (from 11 pupils in 1995-1996 to 40 pupils in 2000/2001): the intention to establish Foundation Stage support classes and appoint additional support staff for pupils with SEN, together with additional Nurture Units (EDP Activity 1.2) is the response to this potential weakness.

6.2 Priority 2: Raising attainment in KS3

The broad picture in terms of current KS3 attainment is mixed. In attainment at Level 5, Devon pupils have maintained a clear lead relative to the national attainment level in Maths and Science, and a more modest lead in English. At Level 6 and above, however, the overall picture has been that Devon attainment has risen but has remained in line with the national level - below in English; in line in Mathematics and modestly ahead in Science. Further, there is no indication in the data up to 2000 of Devon moving towards the average of neighbour LEAs - although it is likely that the final data for 2001 will demonstrate some movement in that direction.

The pattern of relative strength in Science and reasonable progress in English and Mathematics is confirmed in the analysis of inspection reports showing schools' progress at KS3 (5.6.4 in the Audit): in inspections under the new framework, no Devon school was found to be making poor progress at KS3 in these subjects. However, relative weakness is apparent in the ICT curriculum, both in relation to national levels and to neighbour LEAs, with a third of Devon secondary schools being found to make poor progress.

The perception is that the KS3 national strategy has been launched well in Devon, with establishment of a strong steering group with full headteacher representation (the group is chaired by a headteacher) and appointment of consultants in good time. Observations drawn from advisers' visits to 31 secondary schools have been consolidated in a management guide for school strategy managers aimed at ensuring that the opportunities provided by the national strategy result in positive improvements through examination of curriculum continuity from KS2 to KS3; the use of baseline student data; evaluation of student performance; analysis of teaching and learning strategies; marking and assessment policies and practices; analysis of gender performance and improvement strategies; the exploitation of opportunities for literacy, and numeracy work across the curriculum. The emphasis is on dissemination of good practice.

In terms of quality of teaching observed in lessons (5.3.4), the picture for both KS3 and KS4 teachers is of a level which is in line with the national level, but which appears to be improving at a faster rate than in England as a whole. A less satisfactory picture emerges in the assessment of secondary schools, with fewer Devon schools being rated "good" or "very good" in OFSTED inspections than in neighbour LEAs in relation to the standards they achieve; to quality of education; to management and efficiency, and to the overall judgement. In terms of their climate; of management and efficiency and of the overall judgement, Devon schools emerged less well than secondary schools nationally.

Hitherto, Devon secondary schools' capacity to recruit sufficient appropriately qualified teachers has been a strength, but there are indications that the position is worsening, and the EDP includes activities to alleviate the emerging difficulties.

6.3 **Priority 3: Raising attainment in KS4**

The broad picture of KS4 attainment is mixed. In terms of their pupils' attainment relative to the national level (in 5+ A*-C; 5+ A*-G; 1+ A*-G and APS), Devon schools have retained a lead, albeit a lead which has narrowed over the past four years. Relative to neighbour LEAs, the picture is more encouraging, with Devon "overtaking" two of the ten neighbour LEAs in the 2001 5+ A*-C results. In contrast, a particular disappointment has been that the percentage of pupils entered for (and the percentage achieving success) in a GCSE/GNVQ examination has shown no overall increase during the past four years - although that position is expected to change given the emphasis on vocational and 14-19 education.

The analysis of schools' progress in curriculum areas points to relative strength in English and Maths, but to weakness in Science (with a quarter of schools making poor progress at KS4 in that subject) and to extreme weakness in ICT (with two-thirds of schools making poor progress). The position in ICT is significantly more serious than in either neighbour LEAs or schools in England as a whole, and will be addressed by an EDP activity, which represents continuation of the LEA's post-inspection action plan.

In terms of the assessment of Devon secondary schools, the picture is broadly disappointing: in the most recent OFSTED inspection, the overall judgement was that 61% of Devon schools were rated good or very good - significantly below the level in neighbour LEAs, and slightly below the national level.

A relative weakness is that the percentage of post-16 students who continue in full-time education in Devon (70.6% in 2000) is below the national figure (71.7%) or that for the Devon and Cornwall Connexions area (72.3%). An EDP activity aimed at developing of the 14-19 curriculum is expected to extend choice and diversity in courses and to encourage take-up of post-16 opportunities.

The development of vocational education and work-related learning has made reasonable progress in Devon: pupils from 30 out of 37 secondary schools followed vocational courses leading to awards in 2000/2001. A number of projects which strengthen links between schools and colleges and allow learners to make better-informed choices about post-16 choices are in train under the aegis of an effective Learning Partnership, in which there has developed a close working relationship between the LEA, the LSC and other partners, including local FE colleges, Employees, Training Providers and the Connexions Service, and which has a full-time Partnership Development Officer - a seconded LEA adviser - in post.

Partnership working is also seen as a local strength in several aspects of direct co-operation between schools and colleges, in work with District Health Authorities and (increasingly) Primary Health Care Trusts, and the Devon Arts in Schools initiative.

The comments made about the quality of teaching and the recruitment of teachers in the notes which relate to Priority 2 relate also to Priority 3.

6.4 **Priority 4: Narrowing the attainment gap/tackling under-achievement**

There are strengths and weaknesses, with a number of significant developments under way, particularly those relating to raising the attainment of pupils in Exeter and to extending inclusion in mainstream schools.

While there are variations in attainment levels which are linked to the respective social and economic circumstances of Devon communities, there is no evidence of specific geographical areas or groups of pupils who are at risk of under-attainment, or who have proven under-attainment once the socio-economic variables are taken into account. Thus, there is no current evidence of significant under-performance in, for example, small schools in rural areas, or the largest secondary schools. Nevertheless, there are areas of relative under-performance in relation to the Devon average, and an EDP activity will take forward work aimed at raising standards in Exeter. A steering group has been established (of which four of the seven members, including the Chair, are Exeter Heads) and following consideration of an Action Plan by the Exeter Academic Council its implementation is due to commence and the County Council is currently negotiating a PSA target for improving attainment in Exeter.

The attainment of pupils from ethnic minorities (who are few) is closely monitored. Up to the 2001 SATs and public examinations there has been no significant difference between the results of ethnic minority pupils and the results of Devon pupils as a whole. Provision for children for whom English is an additional language, also, is regarded as a strength.

Provision for Gypsy and Travellers' children is well-established in Devon and represents a strength. Similarly, there is a well-established programme of activities for gifted pupils and support and advice to schools.

Against this, the extent of boys' under-performance must be considered a weakness. Differential performance between boys and girls at KS1, KS2 and KS3 has been broadly consistent since 1975: while there is broad parity between boys and girls in Mathematics (KS1, KS2 and KS3) and Science (KS2 and KS3), there is significantly higher performance by girls in reading and writing (KS1) and English (KS2 and KS3) which is reflected in the KS4 results (Section 5.8 in the Audit): boys' and girls' Maths and Science results are similar but girls' attainment is higher in English and other subjects - Art, Drama, MFL, RS, Geography and History.

To extend the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools has been a priority for the LEA, and a number of initiatives are now taking effect. The pilot project for inclusion is based on special schools in Exeter and Dartington and is nearing the end of its third year; pupils from these schools have been successfully included for a variety of lessons and activities in neighbouring mainstream schools at both primary and secondary levels. An evaluation by the University of Plymouth has confirmed that there is an increasing two-way movement of pupils between the special and mainstream schools; that one-third of included pupils were having

access to English and Mathematics in their mainstream settings, and that more than 90% of participants believe that their inclusion experience was satisfactory or better. An EDP activity continues and extends this work.

According to national guidance the proportion of statemented pupils is too high although there has been a reduction in the number of children with statements of SEN - from 3768 in June 2000 to 3643 in June 2001, representing a fall from 3.9% to 3.85% when expressed as the percentage of Devon pupils who have statements of SEN. The percentage of statements of SEN that has been reviewed and discontinued was 4.2% in the 2000 calendar year, compared with 1.0% - the median figure among neighbour LEAs - and 0.8% - the median figure among LEAs nationally.

A further EDP activity relates to support for children in public care, whose current attainment level must be regarded as a weakness. Overall, the current level of exclusions from mainstream schools is not regarded as a weakness, but there are particular concerns. The rate of permanent exclusions from special schools and of children in public care were each more than twice the national level in 2000/2001. Against that, the level of permanent exclusions from secondary schools, and the level of fixed-term exclusions of more than 5 days from secondary and special schools are each well below the national level. A particular strength is the extent to which pupils receiving alternative tuition were reintegrated in school in 2000/2001 - 14.9% of pupils, compared with a national median level of 8.4%. The increase in the number of permanently excluded pupils reported in the Audit justifies a programme of activities both to secure improved provision for excluded pupils and to attempt to forestall further exclusions.

Data about absence indicates that while Devon's rate is below the national level, it is higher than in neighbour LEAs - although the Foot & Mouth epidemic led to a higher rate of absence in several parts of Devon in 2001. The attendance of secondary age Traveller children is relatively high but the EDP target for reducing unauthorised absence in secondary schools in 2000/2001 was not met, and the current level of absence is regarded as a weakness.

6.5 Priority 5: Support for schools causing concern

An analysis of the effectiveness of LEA policy to identify and support schools with weaknesses appears as section 4.3. The conclusion there - that the LEA's record in supporting schools which have identified weaknesses is a good one - is in line with the conclusion of the OFSTED inspection of the LEA, that "once schools have been identified as requiring special measures or having serious weakness the LEA has in most cases provided very good support".

Against that, there was criticism in the OFSTED Inspection report that the LEA had failed to identify some schools' emerging difficulties. The LEA is developing analysis of performance data in order to reach a fuller understanding of local thematic variables which bear upon school performance.

However, an emerging strength has been the extent to which there is now a shared understanding with schools about responsibility for and processes for supporting schools. This led to the recent publication of the policy document "Raising Standards in Devon Schools" (published January 2002), prepared by a group which includes representatives of the Devon Association of Governors, Headteacher and Teacher Associations and representatives of the LEA. This document sets out guidance and information about the way in which the LEA and schools will work together in a common endeavour to raise standards and support school self-improvement within Devon, reflecting the statutory duties of the LEA set out in the Code of Practice on LEA-school relations.