Inspection of

Flintshire Local Education Authority

Access and Social Inclusion

January 2005
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1. Introduction

Local education authority inspections are carried out under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997. They contribute to, and comply with the requirements of, the Wales Programme for Improvement\(^1\). Each LEA inspection usually focuses on at least one major area of activity that has already been the focus of a self-evaluation process by the LEA.

Flintshire LEA carried out a review of its activities concerned with access and social inclusion in the summer and autumn terms 2004. The authority used the criteria developed by the Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW), Estyn and the Audit Commission to support LEA self-evaluation. The review was linked to the authority’s processes for review, evaluation and improvement planning of services and to the overall framework of the Wales Programme for Improvement. The authority included the following areas of work in its review:

- promoting social inclusion;
- provision of school places;
- asset management planning;
- admissions to schools;
- support and provision for pupils with no school place;
- support for attendance at school;
- home-to-school transport; and
- value for money in promoting social inclusion.

These areas of activity were inspected in January 2005. The inspection team comprised an inspector from the Audit Commission’s local education authority inspectorate and three inspectors from Estyn. The team:

- examined documentation provided by the authority;
- read published information about the authority’s performance;
- attended a Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee meeting;
- interviewed the Chief Executive, senior officers, service personnel and head teachers;

\(^1\) Wales Programme for Improvement: Guidance for local authorities (Circular 18/2002), National Assembly for Wales, 2002
• held meetings with elected members, including the Leader of the Council, and representatives of partner organisations;

• visited a sample of primary and secondary schools; and

• inspected the records of a small sample of individual pupils.

The inspection team is required to make two key judgements. These are:

(1) **How good is the LEA’s performance in respect of the area of responsibility that is being inspected?**

The LEA’s performance in discharging its responsibilities is rated on a four-point scale as follows:

- excellent - good with outstanding features
- good - good features and no important shortcomings
- fair - good features outweigh shortcomings
- poor - many important shortcomings.

(2) **Will the LEA’s performance improve in respect of the area of responsibility that is being inspected?**

The prospects of improvement are rated on a four-point scale:

- excellent - improvement prospects are good, with significant improvements already in place
- promising - improvement prospects are good, with no major barriers
- uncertain - some good prospects, but barriers in important areas
- poor - many important barriers to improvement.

The inspection team’s findings in relation to access and social inclusion are summarised in Section 3 of this report.
2. Background

Flintshire lies on the north-east corner and coastline of Wales. It covers an area of 438 square kilometres and is one of the most industrial areas in Wales. The county has a population of 148,600 residents living in 61,188 households. Of all Welsh counties, Flintshire has the lowest proportion of its population born in Wales and the second lowest proportion of retired residents. The proportion of children aged under 16 is above the Welsh average. Flintshire has the lowest proportion of Welsh speakers in Wales.

Flintshire has five major settlements: Mold, Flint, Buckley, Holywell and Deeside. The population density is high compared with the rest of Wales. Flintshire is the least deprived area in Wales, but there are pockets of deprivation in both urban and rural areas.

The local economy is currently buoyant. Manufacturing accounts for 38% of all jobs, with agriculture, construction and retail also making a significant contribution. The unemployment rate is low compared with the rest of Wales, though a relatively high proportion (16%) of residents are in low-skilled, low-paid occupations.

Flintshire Local Education Authority (LEA) maintains 75 primary schools, 12 secondary schools, three special schools, one nursery school and one pupil referral unit that operates on several different sites. Welsh-medium education is provided in one secondary and five primary schools. In March 2004, the number of pupils on roll ranged from 18 to 562 in primary schools and from 516 to 1702 in secondary schools.

The proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals (12.2% in January 2004) is well below the average for Wales (17.6%). Just under 1% of pupils in maintained schools aged five and over are from minority ethnic backgrounds. About one-third of pupils identify themselves as Welsh, compared with two-thirds in the whole of Wales.

Funding

Schools in Flintshire receive less funding per pupil than those in most other areas of Wales. In 2004-2005, the individual schools budget (ISB) for primary schools is £2407 per pupil compared with the average for Wales of £2740. In secondary schools, the ISB is the lowest in Wales at £3202 per pupil, compared with the average of £3456.

The proportion of the overall school budget (86.4%) that the authority delegates to schools is slightly less than the average for Wales (88.5%). Grant income for education at £393 per pupil is very close to the national average of £396 per pupil. The non-delegated LEA budget is the third lowest in Wales at £581 per pupil, compared with the average of £674. Within the LEA budget, service costs are generally lower than Welsh averages although school improvement at £141 per pupil is the second highest.
Access and social inclusion

Flintshire County Council is organised into eight directorates, one of which is the Education, Children's Services, and Recreation (ECSR) Directorate. The ESCR Directorate is organised into four divisions. The divisions are:

- school services;
- children's services;
- libraries, culture and heritage; and
- development and resources.

Within the directorate, the development and resources division is responsible for asset management planning, planning of school places, admissions to schools and home-to-school transport. The school services division, through the work of the Behaviour Improvement Service and the Inclusion Welfare Service, is responsible for supporting attendance and making provision for pupils with no school place.

The Cabinet comprises nine members of the majority group including the Leader and Deputy Leader. It provides leadership and a policy framework for the Council. The Cabinet has eight portfolio holders with responsibilities that in the main reflect directorate structures. The Lifelong Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee oversees the work of the ECSR Directorate.
3. Summary: Access and social inclusion

The scoring chart displays information in two dimensions, one for each of the two key inspection judgements. The inspection judgements are represented by the position of the black circle in relation to the descriptors at the left-hand side and at the foot of the chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What are the prospects for improvement?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Promising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How good is the LEA’s performance?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*</td>
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The authority's performance in relation to access and social inclusion is fair.

Good features of the authority's performance are that:

- senior officers are very knowledgeable, enthusiastic and well-regarded;
- there is thorough consultation between the authority and its stakeholders;
- partnership working is effective;
services consistently secure the social inclusion of vulnerable children and young people;

there is very thorough tracking of the location and educational provision for pupils with no school place (this is an outstanding feature);

schools receive good-quality support for their work to promote the attendance and well-being of pupils;

the management of admissions to school is efficient and effective;

highly accurate forecasting of pupil numbers supports school place planning;

there is effective planning of new provision for pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools; and

the day-to-day management of home-to-school transport ensures that it is reliable and that pupils are safe.

Shortcomings in the authority’s performance are that:

- school buildings are in poor condition, with a significant backlog of essential repair and maintenance work;
- the costs of home-to-school transport are too high;
- there are too many surplus places in primary schools; and
- asset management and school place planning do not take enough account of standards of achievement in schools and in post-16 provision.

Access and social inclusion has uncertain prospects for improvement.

Factors that are likely to support improvement are that:

- the Chief Executive, Leader and senior officers are highly committed to making improvements to services;
- through its Base Budget Review, the authority is fundamentally reviewing its priorities in order to identify resources to support service improvements;
- the authority is making good progress in tackling key issues identified by corporate and departmental risk assessments;
- lead elected members understand the issues and there is effective overview and scrutiny;
- the service review of access and social inclusion is comprehensive, detailed and identifies almost all the key areas for development;
the authority has taken and successfully implemented difficult decisions about the admissions policy; and

there has been good progress in implementing recommendations from Estyn’s inspection of the Inclusion Service and from the authority’s review of the Inclusion Welfare Service.

Factors that are likely to impede improvement are that:

- the authority has not brought together information about surplus places, the condition of buildings and the standards of pupils’ achievement to develop a clear view of the schools that will be needed in 5 to 10 years’ time;

- there is no strategy that securely identifies sufficient capital funds to support improvements to schools in the medium to long term;

- the current management capacity in the directorate is insufficient to carry out the strategic and operational work that is likely to be required to implement key changes; and

- the complexity of the authority’s arrangements for planning and reviewing services makes unnecessary demands on managers’ time.
Recommendations: Access and social inclusion

In order to secure the improvements that are needed, the local authority should:

R1 develop a coherent and comprehensive medium-term to long-term strategy for the organisation, condition and suitability of Flintshire schools that:

- identifies the resources needed to improve school buildings;
- addresses the need to reduce surplus places;
- will raise standards, particularly in secondary schools; and
- will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of post-16 provision;

R2 ensure that the Council’s proposed medium-term financial strategy identifies the resources that are available to improve school buildings;

R3 improve transport procurement arrangements in order to secure better value for money on home-to-school transport;

R4 enhance the capacity of staff in the directorate to work strategically; and

R5 rationalise the arrangements for planning, reviewing and consultation.
How good is the LEA’s performance?

Are the authority’s aims clear and challenging?

Among the key principles that underpin the work of the authority are improving education and promoting social inclusion. Partners and stakeholders have a good understanding of these principles. The ECSR Directorate Plan 2004-2008 has a number of key aims, including:

- working in partnership with other agencies to promote social inclusion of children;
- ensuring effective planning of school places and provision of suitable accommodation for schools; and
- supporting school staff in raising pupils’ standards of achievement and attainment.

The directorate’s plan identifies aspects of the promotion of social inclusion as key priorities and sets out clear objectives, outcomes and targets for this activity. However, the plan does not identify access to education and promoting attendance as key priorities. Though the Education Strategic Plan and Supplementary Education Strategic Plan for 2004-2005 have clear references to promoting social inclusion, they do not contain clear aims for improving access to education or promoting attendance. Overall, access to education does not have a clear enough place in the directorate’s key strategic plans.

The authority’s School Organisation Plan for 2004 to 2009 sets out principles for managing school places, including establishing a more proactive strategy for removing surplus places, developing a policy for small schools and a more precise forecasting methodology for housing developments. The plan also has clear aims for improving the basic fabric of buildings and schools have a secure understanding of these aims.

The Community Strategy for 2004-2010 has ‘learning and creating communities’ as one of its five key themes, but it contains no specific reference to access to education or promoting attendance. The draft Corporate Plan has a priority of ‘investing in tomorrow’s future’ and identifies improving standards of accommodation as a key challenge.

The Unitary Development Plan for 2000-2015 has not been finalised. The draft plan that was deposited in September 2003 aims to ensure a sustainable future for Flintshire. It refers to the provision of suitable and accessible community facilities, but makes no reference to improving access to education. The authority’s Asset Management Plan (AMP) contains suitable policies and priorities, but does not link clearly enough with the Education Strategic Plan, the directorate plan or the draft Unitary Development Plan.

In general, the links between corporate and directorate plans are not clear enough.
Do the authority's policy, provision and relationships meet these aims?

Performance management

The authority is beginning to implement a comprehensive performance management framework that is clearly linked with the Wales Programme for Improvement process. The Chief Executive, Leader of the Council, senior officers and key elected members are committed to making continuous and sustained improvements in all the authority’s services. The council’s Improvement Journey for 2004-2005 identifies performance management as a medium risk and highlights a number of key improvements made since the previous year, when it was listed as an area of significant risk.

The authority is in the process of undertaking a fundamental challenge to all its priorities, practices and processes through its Base Budget Review (BBR). The authority is willing to look critically at what it does and to seek out new methods of working.

Although the ECSR Directorate is making good progress in implementing the corporate performance management framework, some aspects are under-developed. The authority established a Strategy and Performance Improvement Unit (SPIU) within the directorate last year. Since then, the directorate has started to make faster progress with performance management.

The SPIU organises management information and works with strategic and operational managers to monitor service delivery. It is responsible for the coordination of the BBR process in the directorate. The effective support of the SPIU has enabled officers in the directorate to complete phase one of the BBR on time.

A number of aspects of performance management are still under-developed. Systems for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of services are not fully established. Service plans are not consistently linked with directorate and corporate plans, and do not always contain targets that are clearly linked with key performance indicators. Reviews do not make consistent use of information to compare the costs and effectiveness of services with those provided by similar authorities. The authority is at an early stage in linking directorate and service objectives and targets with a process of staff appraisal.

Social inclusion

Officers and elected members provide clear and energetic leadership and are fully committed to the authority’s aims of promoting social inclusion. Senior officers are well respected by head teachers and partners in other divisions and other agencies.

The authority effectively ensures that some of the most vulnerable children and young people have full access to education and achieve good standards. Fewer pupils leave school without any recognised qualification than in the rest of Wales. The authority exceeds the national target for 50% of looked-after children to achieve at least one GCSE.
Within the ECSR Directorate, officers in education and children’s services divisions work together to provide effective services for children and young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties, for excluded pupils and for looked-after children. There are well-developed links, sometimes supported by formal partnership agreements, with external agencies, including the police, the Youth Offending Team and local health services. The authority responds quickly to the educational needs of excluded pupils by providing education otherwise than at school.

The Inclusion Welfare Service provides specific support for Traveller Children and for looked-after children. The service provides valuable advice to schools on the management and prevention of bullying, and on child protection issues.

The Behaviour Support Team works in partnership with primary schools to support children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. This work has been particularly effective in reducing exclusions in primary schools, from which only one pupil was permanently excluded in 2003-2004.

Overall, the rate of exclusion from secondary schools is below the Welsh average. Officers are aware of a rising exclusion rate in a few secondary schools. However, the authority does not link information about exclusions and attendance with data on pupils’ achievements in individual schools and so misses opportunities to bring broader social inclusion information into its strategic planning for school improvement.

The authority provides effective additional support for pupils who are at risk of exclusion from its special schools. Although, nationally, exclusions from this sector are much higher than in mainstream schools, in Flintshire there have been no permanent exclusions from special schools in the past year. The authority has set a target to maintain this outstanding achievement.

**School places**

The School Organisation Plan provides a clear analysis of the key issues that the authority must deal with in order to continue to provide enough suitable school places.

The authority's forecasts of pupil numbers in primary and secondary schools, across the whole authority and for individual schools, are highly accurate. Comparison with other authorities shows that Flintshire’s performance in forecasting is the joint best in Wales. There is thorough and effective consultation on school place planning between the authority, its schools and partner agencies, including neighbouring local authorities.

Over the next five years, the school population of Flintshire is expected to decline by some 1000 primary pupils and 700 secondary pupils, so the proportion of surplus places will increase unless the authority takes action. The authority's review identifies this as a key issue.
The information published by the Welsh Assembly Government for autumn 2003 states that the proportion of surplus places in Flintshire primary schools is 18.8%. However, in August 2004, the authority supplied the Assembly with revised figures for primary surplus places that took account of places for nursery pupils and those with special educational needs. The revised proportion of surplus places in primary schools is 11.7%, with 16% of schools having more than 25% of surplus places. The original and revised figures both exceed the recommended target of 10%.

The authority is beginning to tackle the issue of surplus primary school places by developing a policy that sets out suitable principles for reviewing small primary schools when pupil numbers and the school budget are forecast to meet specific criteria. The principles that underpin the policy include a clear commitment to consider the quality of education that small schools provide. However, the criteria for reviewing individual schools do not take account of the standards that pupils achieve or the condition of school buildings.

The proportion of surplus places in secondary schools is 6.6%. There are no secondary schools with more than 25% of surplus places and only one with between 20% and 25%. The authority’s new admissions policy has led to a successful reduction of surplus places in some secondary schools by limiting the numbers of pupils admitted to schools that were previously over-filled.

There are sixth forms in 11 secondary schools. Some of these are too small to provide a broad, balanced curriculum in a cost-effective way. The largest sixth form has 419 pupils on roll and the next largest has 185. The smallest has only 39 pupils. Five schools, including the authority’s only Welsh-medium secondary school, have fewer than 100 pupils on roll on the sixth form. Three of the small sixth forms collaborate with a local college in a consortium arrangement to provide students with access to a broader range of subjects than would otherwise be available. However, standards of achievement at GCE AS and A level for pupils in the consortium are below the average for the whole authority and generally below the levels expected from their prior attainment at GCSE. Although officers in the directorate are aware of this, there are no firm plans to change current arrangements.

Officers and elected members have recently met representatives of ELWa to clarify the expected impact of the new arrangements for funding post-16 provision and to raise a number of concerns about the proposed changes. Whilst it is sensible for the authority to take account of the new funding arrangements, overall it has responded too slowly to the evidence of poor standards of achievement in some of its smallest sixth forms.

The authority’s proposals to reorganise provision for pupils with special educational needs take good account of the need to make more effective use of places in special schools and to make more provision for these pupils in mainstream schools. Plans include appropriate consideration of the availability and suitability of places in primary schools.
Asset management planning

The council’s Improvement Journey for 2004-2005 identifies corporate asset management as a significant risk in 2003 and 2004. The authority has identified the need to improve the condition of schools. The Lifelong Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee investigated the issue of capital funding for Flintshire schools in 2003 and concluded that the resources then allocated were inadequate to bring schools up to the standard that schools and the authority considered appropriate. The council has agreed to prioritise this in future years.

Flintshire completed condition surveys of all of its schools in 2002. There is close and effective cooperation between the ECSR Directorate and officers in the corporate planning and property division in carrying out assessments of the sufficiency and suitability of schools. It is estimated that the first phase of this work will be completed during spring 2005. The authority anticipates that the Welsh Assembly Government’s revised guidance on the assessment of school capacity will change the proportion of surplus places. At present, the authority is not able to indicate the likely impact of the revised sufficiency assessments.

Many schools are in poor condition. Over the past six years, school inspections have identified some shortcomings in the adequacy of accommodation for pupils and for the delivery of the curriculum in about 40% of primary and secondary schools, and in all three special schools. There is a backlog of £35m worth of maintenance work, of which £18m worth is regarded as high priority. The current level of expenditure is only enough to prevent further deterioration in school buildings.

The current condition of the authority’s schools reflects low levels of capital expenditure on maintenance and improvement over many years. A high proportion of the capital expenditure on schools depends on specific government grants. The authority received a total of £5.2m school improvement grant between 2002 and 2005. In the same period the council allocated a decreasing proportion of its own capital budget to education:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Capital Budget</th>
<th>Education Capital Budget</th>
<th>% of capital budget allocated to education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002/03</td>
<td>£30.0m</td>
<td>£5.2m</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003/04</td>
<td>£22.5m</td>
<td>£2.0m</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004/05</td>
<td>£9.2m</td>
<td>£0.6m</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The Welsh Assembly Government has allocated a further £9m school building improvement grant to the authority over the period up to 2010. A further £1.8m has been allocated from the New Opportunities Fund toward the cost of improved school sports facilities.

In 2003-2004, the authority delegated £400,000 to schools for minor repairs and maintenance work. Schools used other funds to supplement this budget and spent about 20% more than the authority allocated.
Over the past two years, the authority has made good progress in meeting its priorities for essential repairs and maintenance to school roofs, windows, heating systems and toilets. Schools understand that these are the current priorities and are of the view that the authority is doing all that it can with the funding that is currently available.

In those schools where the authority has carried out more extensive building work, the programmes have been well managed, completed on time and on budget. The newest primary school provides an extremely good environment for teaching and learning.

Admissions to schools

The authority manages admissions to schools efficiently. The arrangements for admissions and appeals meet the requirements of the Welsh Assembly Government Code of Practice. The information booklet that the authority provides for parents is accurate, timely, detailed and helpful.

The authority implemented a revised admissions policy in 2003. The policy is appropriately based on the principle that local schools should serve local children. There are clear links between the admissions policy and the policy on provision of home-to-school transport. The authority consults effectively with other admissions authorities when planning, delivering and reviewing admissions.

In 2004, the authority met 99% of parental preferences. There were no appeals for primary admissions. No infant classes exceed the required limit of 30 pupils. The authority considered 34 appeals for admission to two over-subscribed secondary schools. These appeals were dealt with in very good time, enabling pupils to take part in induction activities in their new school.

The authority’s review noted the intention to develop a formal protocol to improve the arrangements for the admission of permanently-excluded pupils to an alternative school. The review also highlighted the need for further consideration of the impact of the home-to-school transport policy on pupils who are admitted to schools out of their locality.

Pupils with no school place

The authority's procedures for tracking pupils who have no school place are very effective and are an outstanding feature of the service.

The Inclusion Welfare Service (IWS) maintains an accurate database that lists all excluded pupils, their educational history, the provision that is being made for them and the costs of that provision. Inclusion welfare officers check school registers and school rolls to make sure that all pupils are accounted for and that none become lost to education. If a pupil cannot be located, inclusion welfare officers make a persistent search that includes home visits and close working with other agencies until it is established that the pupil is safe. Procedures for tracking pupils who move out of, or into, the authority are effective.
There is good monitoring of the arrangements for home education. The Behaviour Improvement Service monitors the provision for seven children who are educated by their parents at home. A further 27 pupils attend a local centre that is managed collectively by parents and is registered as an independent school. Two of these pupils have statements of special educational needs (SEN). The authority maintains good links with this centre and reviews the progress of the pupils with SEN.

The authority makes effective provision for pupils educated otherwise than at school. Pupils who are excluded from school for 15 days or more are normally placed in one of the sites of the portfolio pupil referral unit (PPRU). A team of home tutors organises individual educational programmes for pupils who are too ill to attend school, for excluded pupils who are awaiting an alternative placement and for pregnant girls who choose home tuition. The authority provides home tuition quickly to enable a pupil’s education to continue with the least possible disruption. Home tutors work closely with other officers in the Behaviour Improvement and Inclusion Welfare Services to help pupils to return to school as soon as possible.

Home tutors, teachers in the PPRU and officers in the directorate have high expectations for pupils. They encourage them to sit GCSE examinations and to progress to college courses. Pupils frequently achieve higher standards than expected, given their educational and personal histories.

Support for attendance

The authority provides effective support for attendance at school through the work of the Inclusion Welfare Service (IWS). The IWS is well led and managed. It has appropriate priorities, policies and clear documentation to guide the work of officers and schools in promoting attendance. The authority meets its statutory requirements in relation to attendance. The service has sufficient capacity to provide schools with the necessary support for attendance.

The IWS is organised around clusters of schools. Officers are based in secondary schools in order to work with the host school and its feeder primary schools. Following consultation with schools in 2003, the service increased its support for attendance in special schools and the PPRU by allocating a full-time officer to this work.

The authority reviewed the IWS last year and proposed changes to the role and deployment of officers. Schools were fully involved in the review and gave largely positive feedback about the work of the service. In response, the authority has already made a number of changes to the organisation of the service that have improved its efficiency and effectiveness.

Schools’ views of the service remain positive. Head teachers value the work of the IWS highly but some consider that they do not receive enough time from the service. They particularly appreciate the quality and extent of the support that the IWS gives in promoting home-school partnerships, in providing advice on general social and welfare matters, and in coordinating work with other agencies. These are aspects of the IWS role that go beyond core requirements in relation to attendance.
The authority is still in consultation with secondary head teachers to agree a revised model of time allocation of IWS staff that better reflects the needs of schools. The authority has accurately analysed schools’ needs and proposed a number of models that will lead to a redistribution of IWS time.

**Home-to-school transport**

The authority’s transport eligibility policy is clear and readily available to pupils and parents. It has consulted schools and some pupils in drawing up and reviewing the policy, but has not included contractors or parents in the process.

Day-to-day home-to-school transport arrangements work well. The authority follows appropriate procedures for agreeing home-to-school transport contracts. The authority, through its contractors, provides a safe, reliable service that delivers pupils to school or to college on time. There are well-organised arrangements for escorting pupils with special educational needs, for enabling pupils to travel home easily from after school activities and to prevent bullying and vandalism on school buses.

The authority recognises that it is probably not obtaining good value for money spent on home-to-school transport and that it is not keeping increases to the budget at an acceptable level.

The authority’s expenditure on home-to-school transport rose from £3.24m in 2001-2002 to £4.46m in 2003-2004. This increase (38%) is significantly greater than the rate of inflation and exceeds the average rise in costs of home-to-school transport nationally. Most of this increase has arisen because the authority has continued to procure services from a limited number of external contractors whose charges have increased sharply in recent years. The increased costs have been met by additional budget allocations or by mid-year adjustments to the budget.

A whole-authority review of transport in 2002 did not help the authority to secure better value for money and nor did a more recent report from an external consultant. In November 2004, the authority set up a transport review task group that appropriately includes senior officers, elected members and head teachers. The group is considering different procurement options.

Although the ECSR Directorate is the budget-holder for home-to-school transport, officers in the Directorate of Economic and Environmental Regeneration are responsible for letting, managing and monitoring contracts. The authority intends to appoint an additional third-tier officer in the ECSR Directorate in order to manage the work needed to secure better value for money in home-to-school transport.

**Value for money**

The authority gives value for money in most aspects of its work to promote access and social inclusion. Costs are generally similar to, or slightly less than, those in other authorities.

Budget monitoring within the ECSR Directorate is good. Actual expenditure on services rarely exceeds the set budgets.
How does performance compare?

Standards of achievement

Pupils generally achieve standards that are above the Wales average. Less able pupils in key stage 4 achieve standards in GCSE examinations that are well above the national average. However, in relation to the scores predicted from the percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals, standards at key stage 4 are generally lower than expected in about half of the authority’s secondary schools. Sixth form standards in the authority are below the Wales average.

The published external examination standards achieved in summer 2004 by pupils in key stages 4 and 5 in Flintshire compared with national averages are shown in the table below.

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pupils in Flintshire</th>
<th>Pupils in Wales</th>
<th>Flintshire ranking within Wales</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5+ GCSE A* to C</td>
<td>53.4%</td>
<td>51.4%</td>
<td>7/22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5+ GCSE A* to G</td>
<td>89.7%</td>
<td>85.3%</td>
<td>3/22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1+ GCSE A* to G</td>
<td>94.8%</td>
<td>92.6%</td>
<td>5/22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average points score: GCSE</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>7/22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average points score: GCE A/AS or vocational equivalent</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>16/22</td>
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Attendance

Attendance in primary schools at 93.6% of sessions in 2003-2004 is the eighth highest in Wales and is just higher than the national average of 93.2%.

In 2003-2004, pupils in maintained secondary and special schools missed 8.7% of school sessions due to absence. This is better than the Wales average figure of 9.4%. Unauthorised absence, at 0.7%, is well below the Wales average of 1.7% for the same year.

Exclusion

In 2002-2003, the authority’s rate of permanent exclusion from secondary schools (0.9 per 1000 pupils) was below the national average (1.7 per 1000), and the fifth lowest in Wales. The rate of fixed-term exclusions of up to five days (31.6 per 1000) was also below the Wales average (49.5 per 1000). However, the rate of fixed-term exclusions of six days or more (10.5 per 1000) was well above average (7.8 per
1000) and the fourth highest in Wales. The authority monitors all excluded pupils carefully and makes sure that those whose exclusions last for six days or more receive appropriate support and education.

School perception survey

Responses to the Audit Commission’s school perception survey in 2004 showed that schools generally view the authority’s work to promote access and social inclusion as between satisfactory and good. However, when compared with other authorities in Wales, the ratings place the authority in the lowest quarter for nine out of fourteen questions. Schools rate the quality of support in bidding for external grants, building maintenance advice and management of building projects as less than satisfactory, but these ratings are in line with the views of schools in other authorities. Through further discussion with a small group of head teachers, officers and inspectors established that in some cases the scores related to dissatisfaction with the quantity, rather than the quality, of service provided. The authority is taking appropriate action to improve its services to schools.

Expenditure

Flintshire spends a higher-than-average proportion of its overall revenue budget on education, 40.8% compared with an average of 39.7%. However, in 2004 - 2005 the Welsh Assembly Government published indicative budget allocations (IBA) for different service areas when it published the standard spending assessments (SSA) for local authorities. Flintshire set an overall revenue budget for 2004 - 2005 of £189.7 million, that is 104% of SSA. Its education budget of £81.9 is only 96% of the authority’s education IBA. This indicates that the relatively low funding of Flintshire schools is a consequence of the way that the council has prioritised its expenditure over past years in addition to relatively low funding allocations from the Assembly.
5. Findings: Access and social inclusion.
Will the LEA’s performance improve?

Is the authority’s self-evaluation process likely to drive improvement?

The authority has appropriately used the self-evaluation criteria produced by ADEW, Estyn and the Audit Commission to measure the quality of its own service provision and to identify areas requiring improvement. The self-evaluation process accurately identified most of the key issues for improvement that this inspection highlighted.

Service managers have received valuable training in identifying service improvements and in preparing draft improvement and action plans.

The authority has made some comparisons with neighbouring authorities, including some use of benchmarking. However this is not consistent across all the services being reviewed.

The LEA has good procedures for consultation that head teachers appreciate and regard as effective.

The council has started to undertake a Base Budget Review (BBR) that has the aim of making the best use of resources to improve services. The review includes all council services, with a brief to examine:

- what is delivered, how it is delivered and the future needs; and
- the allocation of resources to all budget areas.

The BBR guidance is thorough and comprehensive. The directorate BBR review team appropriately includes senior officers from the authority and an elected member. During phase one of the review, the authority gathered a very large amount of detailed information from schools, from service managers and from staff. The process has the potential to make a fundamental difference to the authority’s priorities and to secure value for money in relation to its services. However, to achieve successful outcomes from phase two of the review, the authority will need to make sure it has the capacity to manage the information that emerges from phase one. The workload of senior officers in the ECSR Directorate is already very high. The directorate is likely to find it difficult, within its existing capacity, to complete the BBR work in addition to its other strategic and operational management tasks.

How good is the improvement plan?

The authority has a complex planning process that produces statutory, corporate, directorate and service improvement plans. These plans are generally comprehensive and detailed. They identify appropriate key issues and areas for development. However, there are inconsistencies in the format of plans, which, on occasion, make it difficult to see how they link together.
The links between planning for school improvement, asset management, school places and social inclusion are under-developed. The authority has detailed plans for each of these areas, but has not linked them together well enough to be able to plan how the location, condition and suitability of schools should look in five to ten years time.

The service review action plan for home-to-school transport covers only one issue. This shows clear links to the directorate’s aims and other plans, and has appropriate targets. However, it lacks the required detail of timescales, monitoring procedures, persons responsible and costs. The action plan following the review of home-to-school transport in 2004 includes appropriate actions and identifies persons responsible, but does not mention costs involved nor does it set out monitoring procedures. This plan is not consistent with the format of the service review action plan.

**Will the authority deliver the improvements?**

ECSR Directorate lead officers provide clear and effective leadership, are starting to develop appropriate policies and strategies, and have the competence and vision to tackle the identified shortcomings and issues. However, the directorate’s key officers do not have enough time to undertake the strategic management that is required to make the necessary improvements to its work on managing school places, asset management planning and home-to-school transport.

In the current management structure, senior officers often undertake too much operational work, so reducing their time for strategic work. The authority has identified a need for some additional third-tier management capacity, particularly in home-to-school transport, and for a programme of training for some of the existing operational managers to enable them to take a greater share of strategic work.

The Chief Executive and Leader are committed to making the changes needed to bring about improvement. Lead elected members have a thorough and detailed understanding of the issues and of the need to take difficult decisions. The authority showed a willingness to take difficult decisions when it changed its admissions policy for schools in 2003. Members carry out their scrutiny role effectively. They ask for and receive detailed information on proposed developments.

Elected members are currently undertaking a comprehensive scrutiny of the policy for small primary schools and in the process have collected evidence in meetings with the authority’s primary head teachers.

The authority is committed to improving revenue funding for education and has increased education budgets when opportunities have arisen. In 2004-2005, the authority allocated an additional £350,000 to primary school budgets rather than reduce budgets in the light of falling school rolls. For 2005-2006, the ECSR Directorate will be able to use its efficiency savings to improve services rather than reduce costs and so it will not be subject to the same efficiency-driven budget reductions as other services. In the longer term, the council’s base budget review may lead to a further re-prioritisation of council expenditure. However, there is
presently no medium-term to long-term financial strategy that securely identifies sufficient capital funds to support the required improvements to schools.

Overall, the authority has a good record of making improvements to its services. It is well aware of the key challenges and risks it faces and in response to the Wales Programme for Improvement it has established a robust approach to risk assessment. In the past year, the authority has overcome some very significant barriers to corporate progress, and its overall rate of improvement has increased. There is a willingness to work in partnership to identify and address problems.

The authority is making good progress in implementing the recommendations resulting from the Estyn inspection of its Inclusion Service and from its own review of the Inclusion Welfare Service.