Local government
National report

Schools’ views of their LEA 2004:
the national school survey
Introduction

1 This is the fourth Audit Commission report detailing the results of the national survey of schools. The primary purpose of the survey is to gauge schools’ views of their local education authority (LEA) services and the support that they provide. The survey results identify areas where schools rate their council highly as well as areas where they think they could improve. The survey provides councils with an important self-evaluation tool and is a key component of inspection evidence. The Audit Commission, Ofsted, Estyn and 152 councils across England and Wales collaborated to carry out the third annual national survey of schools’ views in the summer term of 2004. The overall findings are examined in this briefing.

2 This briefing identifies what schools see as the strengths and weaknesses of the support they receive from their LEAs. The survey looks at five areas: LEA strategy, support for school improvement, facilitating access to services, access/promoting social inclusion and special educational needs (SEN). It also looks at issues of particular importance to schools in Wales, such as support for Welsh-medium education. Responses from schools of different types and from schools in different types of LEA are examined, as well as key changes since the last national survey in 2003.

3 The overall response rate was 39 per cent (8,596 out of 21,924 schools responded), broadly in line with last year. However, this rate varied significantly between authorities – from 10 to 100 per cent. The proportions of responding schools of each type (community, voluntary aided, voluntary controlled and foundation), each phase (nursery, primary, secondary, special schools, and pupil referral units), and within each type of authority (county, unitary, metropolitan borough, outer London borough and inner London borough), broadly reflect those found nationally, although counties are relatively under-represented.

4 The findings will be of interest to council officers and elected members, to headteachers and governors of schools, to education policymakers and to anyone interested in the relationships between councils and schools. The detailed analyses upon which this briefing is based are available on the survey project website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/schoolsurvey. This briefing and the analyses, together with the local survey results that each participating council has received, should allow authorities to compare national and local issues.

Key findings

5 The survey shows that schools continue to rate their LEA support as at least satisfactory in a majority of areas – 92 per cent of questions on the survey. Despite this the variation between councils is still striking.

6 The items on which schools gave their highest and lowest ratings were similar to those in 2003 and 2002. However, the items on which schools’ views have changed the most, both positively and negatively, are quite different from previous years.

7 Of the five areas of LEA activity surveyed, support for school improvement received the most positive rating overall.
8 The highest-rated items were LEA support for literacy and numeracy, personnel advice and casework and financial support and advice, as in previous years.

9 The lowest-rated item remains support for bidding for external grants, followed by items involving building issues (building maintenance and the programming and management of building projects) and support for SEN.

10 In Wales, the LEA’s arrangements for securing access to Welsh-medium education and curriculum support, and the quality of support for the Welsh language all received very positive ratings from schools. The item relating to access to Welsh-medium education again achieved the highest average rating of all the survey questions.

Changes over time

11 Schools’ views were more positive than in 2003. The upward trend since 2002 was maintained.

12 In particular, schools have become more positive about questions relating to funding issues managed by their councils. The rationale behind the school funding formula and the consultation on the planning and review of the councils’ education budget achieved the largest increases in satisfaction across the survey.

13 The question relating to the effectiveness of LEAs in encouraging schools to work together also achieved among the largest positive changes in rating since last year.

14 Schools have become more positive about questions on SEN, despite this area remaining one of low satisfaction overall. Educational psychology support, LEA monitoring of the progress of pupils with SEN and the overall capacity of LEAs to support SEN work received some of the most positive changes in ratings.

15 A few items received a more negative average response than in 2003. These included the quality of catering services provided by LEAs and the support for numeracy (despite this remaining one of the most highly rated items overall). Also rated more negatively were questions relating to the leadership provided by elected members and the level of LEA support for the professional development of teachers, including newly qualified teachers (NQTs).

Differences between schools

16 Primary schools and special schools were more positive overall than other phases of school. Secondary schools gave the least positive ratings overall, especially in response to questions about bidding for external grants, behaviour support and building maintenance services.

17 Voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools rated their councils the most positively. Foundation schools remain less positive than other types of school.
Differences between LEAs

18 As in 2003, schools in Wales rated their LEAs the most positively on every section of the survey. This was particularly the case with responses to questions about payroll, technical support for ICT, catering services and electronic communication between schools and LEAs.

19 Support for raising attainment at Key Stage 3 and support for gifted and talented pupils – both areas in which there is no formal national strategy in Wales – were among the few items on which schools in England gave more positive responses than their counterparts in Wales.

20 Of the schools in England, those in metropolitan authorities responded most positively to the majority of questions. In particular, they rated the leadership provided by senior officers most highly. This is a significant change from 2003, when schools in English counties and inner London authorities gave their LEAs the highest ratings.

21 Outer London authorities were rated most negatively by their schools on every section of the survey. This was also the case in previous years (in 59 of the 68 questions applicable to both England and Wales).

22 Inspections tend to confirm the judgements that schools form about their councils. There remains a strong, positive relationship between LEA effectiveness (as judged in LEA inspections in England) and more positive ratings by schools.

The survey project

23 The survey meets the needs of inspection bodies, local authorities and other stakeholders in taking account of the views of a key group of local service users while seeking to reduce the burden on schools themselves. The vast majority of councils in England and Wales took part in the 2004 survey. A high proportion used it as an opportunity to ask additional questions as part of the same process rather than running separate local surveys.

24 The survey project is evaluated annually by inviting feedback from councils and from responding schools. The feedback has been consistently positive. The survey will be repeated in summer 2005. In line with the Every Child Matters agenda, we intend to develop the survey to meet the changing needs of councils and inspection teams while retaining key elements in order to maintain longitudinal comparisons. We are due to consult all councils in England in December 2004 on our proposed survey for 2005.

25 The Audit Commission continues to develop outputs from the survey. For instance, in 2003 we launched an online guide to the authorities given the highest ratings by their schools for each question in the survey. This helps to identify areas of good practice across England and Wales. We continue to add to the set of analysis reports made available to each council after the survey, and plan to produce a good practice report on maximising survey response rates and utilising survey results.

26 Further information on the survey project can be found at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/schoolsurvey

The judgements made during the inspection of LEAs in England are made on a scale of 1-7 where 1 = very good and 7 = very poor. JRS 52 is a composite judgement about the overall effectiveness of the LEA. The inspection system in Wales operates in a way that makes comparison impossible.

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