# Key Stage 4: towards a flexible curriculum

**Office for Standards in Education**

# Key Stage 4: towards a flexible curriculum

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# Introduction

## Context

1. Achievement at the end of Key Stage 4 has been rising steadily for the last few years. In 2002, over half of 16 year olds achieved five or more A*–C grades in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) or equivalent. Some 89% achieved five or more A*–G grades.

2. Behind the headline figures there are worrying features:

   - the proportion of pupils achieving a grade C or above in both English and mathematics is only 43%, and 39% in English, mathematics and science

   - one in 20 pupils leaves school without any GCSEs

   - there is wide variation in the progress made by different groups of pupils, with boys doing less well than girls and some pupils of minority ethnic heritage underachieving badly

   - a large number of pupils become disaffected with school during Key Stage 4, feeling that the curriculum is not relevant to their needs or that they are having virtually no success in it

   - the behaviour of some pupils causes concern, with many of those excluded permanently being in Year 10

   - attendance drops off in the last two years of compulsory education

   - significant numbers of pupils are not on school rolls in Key Stage 4 and are not being educated elsewhere

   - only 70% of 16 year olds go on to full-time further education, a lower level than in most other developed countries.

3. The recently published paper from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), *14–19: opportunity and excellence*, highlights these problems and proposes changes to the curriculum for 14–16 year olds. A main purpose of these changes is to combine breadth of study with more flexibility for schools and colleges to tailor programmes of study to individual pupils' needs and aptitudes.

## Survey

4. The survey on which this report was based was carried out before the publication of *14–19: opportunity and excellence*. The survey aimed to:

   - examine the changes being made by schools to the curriculum in Key Stage 4 and the effects these have had on pupils' achievement

   - explore the use of programmes to motivate those young people who have lost interest in school and become disengaged from learning

   - assess the quality of provision made outside school for young people who have absented themselves or have been excluded from school

   - evaluate the links between schools, other providers and local education authorities (LEAs).

5.    Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and additional inspectors evaluated a range of provision for 14–16 year olds in six LEA areas: Manchester, Waltham Forest, Camden, Redcar and Cleveland, Hartlepool and Birmingham. The areas were selected in part as a result of evidence in previous LEA inspections that particular attention was being paid to the achievement of different groups of pupils at Key Stage 4. The visits usually took place in conjunction with area-wide inspections of 16–19 provision carried out by Ofsted and the Adult Learning Inspectorate.

6.    In the six areas, inspectors examined provision in a sample of schools and other settings: 60 mainstream schools; 15 special schools; 7 pupil referral units and 7 similar LEA-managed centres not registered as pupil referral units; 40 programmes for 14–16 year olds out of school run by the voluntary or private sectors, training organisations or further education colleges. In four of the areas, education courses organised through Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) were also visited. The settings visited were selected on the basis of the diversity of courses they offered or other developments they were pursuing aimed at raising the attainment of all.

7.    Inspectors interviewed LEA officers about the provision made and about their systems of funding, data-gathering and monitoring. Discussions were held with headteachers and principals, governors, teachers, curriculum co-ordinators in schools and colleges and the proprietors or managers of voluntary and private sector provision. Inspectors interviewed more than 500 pupils, scrutinised their work and evaluated their learning in around 150 lessons. They also interviewed more than 200 parents. Subsequently, they gathered information on pupils' achievements and destinations at 16 from around 40 schools and other providers. Additional evidence on the provision was drawn from school and LEA inspections.

# Main findings

- While steps to improve participation and achievement for the full range of 14–16 year olds were having some success in the areas visited, the quality of provision and outcomes varied widely. In particular, many of those taught in settings other than schools did not experience a coherent curriculum and easy progression to post-16 opportunities.

## Schools

- Most of the schools visited were making good progress in increasing the numbers of young people achieving good levels of success in Key Stage 4 by developing programmes that capitalise on pupils' aptitudes and ambitions.

- Many schools had improved the provision made for lower-achieving and disaffected pupils at Key Stage 4, but there was usually much more to do to create worthwhile and coherent programmes for them. Associated weaknesses, applying to other pupils as well, included inadequate development of literacy and numeracy across the subjects and patchy coverage of the other skills needed for independent study. There was also failure to meet statutory curriculum requirements, notably in information and communication technology (ICT) and religious education.

- The most successful programmes for lower-achieving pupils led to recognised qualifications; they often involved good use of activities outside school and a strong emphasis on applications in the world of work. Carefully selected combinations of GCSEs in similar subjects or extended courses such as General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) enabled lower-achieving pupils and, in some schools, higher-attaining pupils, to do better than they would have done had they taken a large number of single-award GCSEs from diverse areas.

- In four out of five schools the rate at which pupils were excluded was declining. This was due in part to more appropriate and flexible curriculum provision and to the increased use of learning support units, learning mentors and other forms of individualised support.

- Some pupils and their parents in mainstream and special schools did not receive comprehensive information about post-16 options.

## Pupil referral units and centres

■ In the more effective units and centres, young people benefited a good deal from the attention and support they received and were helped to re-engage in full time learning or take up training or employment. The curriculum offered in the settings was generally limited and often did not lead to recognised qualifications.

■ High turnover of staff, inadequate subject knowledge and problems managing difficult behaviour contributed to unsatisfactory or poor teaching in units and centres. A fifth of lessons in the units and over a fifth in the centres lacked interest, challenge and structure.

■ Leadership and management were unsatisfactory or poor in a quarter of units and centres.

## Other forms of alternative provision

■ The quality of the provision for 14–16 year olds made in alternative education projects and by training organisations visited in the survey was unsatisfactory overall.

■ The best alternative programmes had well-defined aims, a strong sense of purpose and commitment to young people, clear expectations of behaviour and work and good systems for monitoring progress. Most of the programmes visited succeeded to some degree in building pupils' confidence and maturity and improving attendance, and some were able to rekindle enthusiasm for learning, but few increased achievement and re-integration into mainstream education to the extent needed.

■ The curriculum provided in alternative education projects was often poor and failed to give pupils opportunities to gain recognised qualifications. Only half of training providers offered opportunities for pupils to gain such qualifications and those that did offered too limited a range. The provision seen for young people in contact with the youth justice system was uneven; its quality was affected by poor communication about pupils' prior attainment and capabilities.

■ Good leadership and management in alternative programmes, including effective analysis of pupils' progress, were rare.

## Information, liaison, funding and monitoring

- Liaison among those involved in providing education for 14–16 year olds was weakest in relation to those pupils in greatest need, including those excluded from school and those moving between schools. For these pupils, the information exchanged between providers was often fragmentary or non-existent.

- LEA support for providers of alternative programmes was inconsistent. LEA monitoring of the programmes they fund was often poor. Lack of a national system for the regulation and inspection of alternative education projects contributed to this.

- The funding of alternative education at Key Stage 4 varied greatly across providers. Some alternative education providers relied on short-term funding that did not enable the programmes to be maintained effectively, and their efforts to secure funding diverted energy from the task of improving teaching and learning.

- The fact that a large number of pupils in the areas visited were unaccounted for in the later years of compulsory education is a matter of serious concern.

## Recommendations

To improve the provision made at Key Stage 4:

- Using the new flexibility available at Key Stage 4, schools should ensure that the curriculum is planned as a whole, with particular attention to what can be done through all subjects and courses to improve basic skills, to provide work-related learning and to secure progression to post-16 opportunities.

- The range of vocational qualifications available to pupils under 16 in schools and in alternative provision should be expanded and providers should ensure recognised qualifications are available to all pupils.

- Where schools make use of placements with external providers for pupils in Key Stage 4, careful planning, clear definition of responsibilities and effective communication are needed to ensure their quality.

- National guidelines should be produced defining the curriculum that should be offered in alternative education programmes. This should include the types of qualifications to be offered, assessment methodology and careers guidance.

- The exchange of information on the attainment and needs of pupils involved in alternative programmes out of school should be improved to secure better monitoring of and accountability for their progress.

- LEAs and, where appropriate, local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) should review the funding of places in alternative education programmes, since the wide range of sources of funding and irregular funding hinders continuity and consistency of provision.

- A system to register providers of alternative education should be established, and the DfES should consider how the quality of their programmes can be evaluated systematically.

- LEAs should ensure that all alternative education centres managed by them are registered as pupil referral units.

- Better systems for tracking pupils missing from school rolls should be put in place and maintained.

# Schools

## Summary

- In the best Key Stage 4 programmes, flexible thinking about the curriculum, together with a good understanding of pupils' aptitudes and prior attainment, enabled courses and activities to be well matched to pupils' needs, capabilities and ambitions. In general, the broader the choice of courses the schools offered, the greater their pupils' success.

- For many mainstream schools, despite improvements in the provision made, the key problem remained the lack of worthwhile and coherent programmes for lower-achieving and disaffected pupils.

- Associated weaknesses, which applied to other pupils as well, included inadequate development across subjects of literacy and numeracy and patchy coverage of the other skills needed for independent study. There was also failure to meet statutory requirements, notably in ICT and religious education.

- Effective use of disapplication of parts of the Key Stage 4 curriculum requirements enabled learning to be tailored to particular interests and aptitudes or for learning in particular subjects to be consolidated. Pupils were most motivated and successful when they followed courses leading to recognised qualifications.

- Carefully selected combinations of GCSEs in similar subjects or extended courses such as GNVQs enabled pupils to achieve more than they would have done had they taken a large number of single subjects.

- Where provision at Key Stage 4 involved placements with providers outside schools, thorough planning, clear definition of responsibilities and effective communication were essential to their quality.

- In four out of five schools visited the number of exclusions was declining. This was due in part to a more flexible curriculum and the use of learning support and mentors.

- Pupils at special schools often achieved well, but attainment varied greatly among pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties, reflecting in part teachers' expectations of them.

- Attendance in mainstream and special schools was improved by a well-managed curriculum, good work by tutors and close attention through other measures.

- Thorough, timely and effective careers education and guidance were provided in around two thirds of the schools, but some pupils, including those in special schools, received incomplete information about the full range of post-16 options.

- Most mainstream schools matched their teachers' experience to the needs of the curriculum at Key Stage 4, but around a third reported significant problems of retention and recruitment. Special schools with a good local reputation and strong leadership encountered few problems, although small schools struggled to recruit subject specialists.

## Schools visited

8.   The 60 mainstream schools visited were broadly typical of the national profile of schools in urban areas, although they had slightly more disadvantaged pupils than the average. The range of achievement was very wide: some were high-achieving schools; several had raised achievement so their pupils often did better than pupils in similar schools; in others, achievement was lower than in most schools. In the majority of schools, differences between the performance of boys and girls reflected the national pattern, with girls gaining better results than boys at GCSE, but in a few of the schools boys did as well as girls.

9.   The 15 special schools visited catered for a range of disabilities. Almost all their pupils had a statement of special educational needs.

10.   Most of the schools visited had seen a steady increase in the numbers of pupils making good progress and achieving good levels of success at the end of Key Stage 4.

## Curriculum policy and organisation

11.   For many of the **mainstream schools** visited, the organisation of the curriculum at Key Stage 4 was a major preoccupation. Around a third of the schools had made significant changes to the pattern of courses at Key Stage 4. The most effective schools had reviewed their provision regularly to ensure that it met statutory requirements and changing needs.

12.   The changes introduced by schools were usually intended to broaden the range of qualifications and courses provided and offer more varied learning activities. Other than GCSE, most of the courses offered led to GNVQ, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) or entry-level awards. Some of the changes made by schools focused on extending opportunities for higher-attaining pupils.

13.   About one in ten schools had a Key Stage 4 curriculum of very high quality. Features of the best practice were:

   - a policy for the key stage which reconciled competing demands
   - clarity and depth of information about courses for pupils and parents, supported by well-integrated and timely careers education and guidance
   - successful efforts to build links between the subjects which pupils take, so that the whole was greater than the sum of the parts
   - a deliberate approach to the provision of work-related learning for all
   - strong connections between Key Stage 4 and education post-16, whether provided in the school or elsewhere
   - highly effective organisation of extra-curricular activities, including study support, to complement and enhance mainstream courses
   - good understanding of pupils' attitudes and prior attainment, enabling activities to be matched to their needs, capabilities and ambitions.

14. Few schools were satisfied that the curriculum they were offering was meeting the needs of all pupils. The main issues identified by schools were:

    - striking the balance between breadth and depth of subject coverage
    - increasing the amount of choice pupils have, while ensuring that they succeed in the core subjects
    - improving basic skills among those whose skills are inadequate for learning, work and daily life
    - improving differentiation in teaching where subjects, such as history, are taken by relatively small numbers of pupils of widely differing ability
    - maintaining and improving the quality of subject teaching in a period of recruitment difficulty.

15. Although many schools had made efforts to improve the provision made for low-attaining and disaffected pupils, in many cases there was much more to do to encourage and promote greater success for these pupils at the age of 16 and to help them to see value in further education or training post-16. The lack of worthwhile, coherent and well-established programmes for these pupils – whose numbers varied considerably from school to school – was the most significant common weakness in the provision seen. Associated weaknesses, which applied to other pupils as well, included inadequate development of literacy and numeracy across subjects and patchy coverage of the other skills needed for independent study. There was also failure to meet statutory requirements, notably in ICT and religious education.

## Patterns of subject choice

16. On the whole, the greater the choice of courses the schools were able to offer to pupils in Key Stage 4 the greater their success.

17. Pupils of all capabilities valued the opportunity to choose options with a good degree of freedom and to take up flexible course arrangements. They welcomed the chance to discontinue subjects in which they had relatively little interest and success and concentrate on others.

18. Good levels of performance were found in some schools with option systems that allowed or encouraged pupils to take a combination of linked subjects, matched to their aptitudes and preferences, within curriculum areas such as humanities, expressive and performing arts, modern foreign languages and technology. Popular combinations were English literature and drama and clusters of technology subjects, including ICT and electronics. Smaller numbers of pupils took three separate sciences or two modern foreign languages, or statistics alongside mathematics.

19. Pupils taking associated subjects in this way tended to show high levels of motivation and to approach their courses with purpose and enthusiasm. They valued the chance to work to their strengths and to see links between learning in similar fields. Analysis of GCSE results from the Ofsted database and from some of the survey schools suggests that performance may be higher than predicted by National Curriculum tests at Key Stage 3.

In one school, higher-attaining pupils are allowed and encouraged to study three separate sciences. In one group, containing an ethnic balance that reflected the composition of the school as a whole, nearly all attained A* and A grades in the three subjects. The progress made from attainment at Key Stage 3 was good. Nine out of ten continued in full-time education after the age of 16.

20.     Most schools visited disapplied parts of the standard Key Stage 4 curriculum for some pupils in some way, formally or informally (that is, not in accordance with the statutory procedures in force at the time). They did this to allow pupils to focus on particular strengths, to undertake extended work-related learning, or to consolidate basic subject knowledge and skills in core subjects. This allowed pupils to work to their aptitudes and on what they needed to do to improve their performance and prospects.

21.     Where disapplication, formal or informal, had a clear rationale and was supported by good careers advice, pupils usually benefited. However, there were cases where disapplication – for example, of the requirement to take design and technology or modern foreign languages – was used in blanket fashion for reasons such as staffing difficulty or pupils' poor performance in previous years.

## Extra-curricular activities

22.     Most of the mainstream schools visited had good programmes of extra-curricular activities for pupils in Key Stage 4, including activities in sports and the arts and homework centres and revision sessions. Participation rates varied widely and were not always monitored closely enough to enable the schools to see whether there were patterns of take-up or relevance which they needed to address.

23.     Among other things, pupils valued the opportunities offered by the school to catch up on coursework under supervision during Year 11 or time for revision classes during holiday periods preceding examinations. In a number of schools, additional study time for completing coursework was provided, including study weekends and Saturday sessions. An extended day was also used in some schools to provide additional time for this purpose, for example in GNVQ information technology.

24.     In some LEAs, the Excellence in Cities programme was used in innovative ways to support and extend work in Key Stage 4. Activities that pupils found stimulating and beneficial included summer schools and specific career-oriented initiatives, often related to higher education. Links between schools and colleges and businesses allowed more part-time work placements to be made available. They also gave schools access to a greater range of learning resources and training for teachers.

## Provision for higher-attaining pupils

25.    Most higher-attaining pupils in the schools visited took at least eight GCSEs, up to 12. Pupils taking a higher number of GCSEs than the rest of the year group were usually pleased to be doing so. This was the case, for example, where pupils were taking a GCSE course in a home language other than English. However, it was not always clear that pupils were deriving particular benefit from their extra courses. In some cases they were clearly over-stretched, and pressures of work, including classes after school, meant that they did not pursue studies in other subjects in as much depth as they would otherwise have done. They were also not as involved in extra-curricular activities as they would have wished. Almost all the pupils doing 10–12 GCSEs were evidently going to do very well in their basic eight or nine and were virtually guaranteed places on advanced-level courses in their most favoured subjects.

26.    Higher-attaining pupils in some schools took GCSE in one or more subjects in Year 10, followed by work towards Advanced Subsidiary (AS) level in the same subject or subjects in Year 11. The schools were generally uncertain, however, about the merits of this approach. Two that planned to discontinue it felt the demands of AS level exceeded the pupils' capacity to manage both this and a further eight or nine GCSE subjects. Some pupils lost confidence in their ability in a subject, with the consequent loss of motivation to continue its study. A few schools offered an AS-level module without formal assessment to enrich the pupils' experience; others provided enrichment activities when early entry created spare curriculum time.

27.    Many parents interviewed were uncertain about accelerated progress to qualifications, with some arguing that taking GCSE subjects early was an unnecessary pressure and detracted from worthwhile voluntary activities, both in and out of school. However, parents supported adjustments to their child's curriculum when the potential benefits, especially higher achievement, were made clear.

28.    About six in ten of the mainstream schools visited used disapplication of parts of the curriculum so that pupils could focus on particular strengths, for example in sciences or the humanities. In several of these schools, the pupils involved made good progress, with around two thirds of them exceeding predictions based on their attainment at Key Stage 3. Nearly all (98%) continued in full-time learning after reaching 16.

29.    The range of programmes supported by national initiatives for gifted and talented pupils was wide. The impact of these programmes was evident through increased activity in areas such as music and sports and the pupils' clear commitment to developing their prowess.

'Lucy' was a keen tennis player and aimed to become a professional. She already played for the county and excelled in the sport at school, where her teachers encouraged her flair for the game. Coaching at the level she needed now was unavailable at school. 'Lucy's' curriculum had been modified by disapplication to make time for mid-week training sessions.

## Vocational courses

30. Around two thirds of the schools offered one or more **GNVQ** courses. Sometimes these provided alternatives to National Curriculum subjects, for example in ICT and design and technology. GNVQ units in modern foreign languages were offered in a few of the schools. GNVQ Part One (equating to two GCSEs) or GNVQ full-award courses (equating to four GCSEs) were distinctive features of the Key Stage 4 curriculum of several of the schools visited. This was more so in specialist schools and city technology colleges, where pupils may have an entitlement to them. Other schools provided GNVQ courses for particular bands or groups of pupils.

31. A few schools altered the length of Key Stage 4 by enabling pupils to begin a Part One GNVQ award, for example, during Year 9. The pupils then take one unit each year until the end of Year 11. An alternative model enables pupils to augment the time allocated to a GNVQ course, such as in ICT, from the time available for options and proceed to a full award during Years 10 and 11.

32. Analysis by schools indicated that GNVQ courses, which occupy a relatively large amount of curriculum time, often enabled pupils with average or relatively low prior attainment to achieve better qualifications than if they had pursued a more diverse curriculum involving a large number of different single-award GCSEs and short courses. More generally, the inclusion of a range of vocational opportunities increased pupils' choice of post-16 pathways and promoted retention after 16.

33. **NVQs** were provided by about one in eight of the schools visited, usually in partnership with a further education college or training provider. Other vocational awards, including technical certificates, were offered in around one in ten schools. A similar proportion of schools offered specialist qualifications for sports or the performing arts. Key skills were part of the provision for pupils in a minority of schools, but were rarely accredited.

34. In some schools, the organisation of course choice was very well matched to pupils' prior attainment. For example, one school organised the curriculum for three broad elective groupings of pupils: one band chose wholly from among GCSEs, others from a combination of GCSE and GNVQ Part One awards, and the third selected from among GCSEs, a GNVQ and an NVQ at a nearby further education college. Pupils were able to make choices from the three pathways to construct a programme that most appropriately matched their needs. Although this structure had advantages for the pupils, and could be efficiently timetabled, some vocational qualifications do not count in the nationally published account of the school's performance.

35. Most schools disapplied parts of the curriculum for a small number of pupils so that they could take a programme of **extended vocational learning** at further education colleges, with training providers or, more occasionally, in the workplace. Pupils remain on the school roll but funding is transferred to the college or training provider. The best programmes had a definite rationale and were integral to the school's curriculum, rather than an add-on. They were well planned and featured efficient communication between the school and the other providers, including employers. The school and other providers were aware of their responsibilities, and information about the pupils' attainment and support needs was provided before the pupils attended for the first time. They gave good attention to careers guidance, often augmented by mentoring. Pupils had the chance to explore career opportunities, gain qualifications and see the relevance of skills in the workplace.

36. Programmes of this quality had clear benefits in terms of pupils' motivation and confidence and, in the majority of cases, in terms of attainment. About six in ten of the pupils attained better GCSE or equivalent grades than predicted from their Key Stage 3 test results. This was despite the fact that their attainment in some areas, notably in NVQs, does not count in performance tables. Around eight out of ten of these pupils continued in full-time learning post-16 either at school, further education college or, occasionally, with a training provider.

## Other aspects of work-related learning

37. Virtually all the schools provided work experience for every pupil during Key Stage 4, and parents and pupils interviewed strongly endorsed the value of it. They felt it provided insights into career pathways and the qualifications needed in them and introduced pupils to the disciplines of working life. In the best practice, work experience served to lift pupils' aspirations and was complemented by programmes designed to raise aspirations for entry to higher education. However, few courses in schools capitalised fully on the learning that arose from work experience, for example by connecting it with longer-term activities such as the Young Enterprise initiative.

38. Very few schools had a comprehensive and well-organised approach to work-related learning across the curriculum for all pupils. Beyond specific vocational courses, teaching which deliberately focused on applications in the world of work was usually limited to one or two subjects at most. Departmental policies on applications in the world of work tended to be disappointing and few teachers made systematic use, for example, of links with local business to enrich the curriculum. Where such links were evident – for instance, in the use of professional designers to advise on graphics applications, or the involvement of craft workers in the visual arts – they were almost always highly regarded by pupils and had clear value for them.

39. In those schools with a well-defined policy on work-related learning, aims and outcomes were specified for all pupils so that work-related learning developed progressively. Within such a policy, a range of subject departments could identify the contributions that they could make. The policy also provided a sound basis for vocational options, including by setting out the criteria for admission to particular courses.

## Pupils with special educational needs

40. In almost all the **mainstream schools** there were sound arrangements to support pupils with special educational needs. Emphasis was given to basic skills, social skills and a range of accredited courses. Where pupils had difficulty coping, either because of behavioural problems or because they were ill-suited to the standard courses offered, alternatives were provided.

41. Several schools had a consolidation programme for low attainers in Key Stage 4 in the form of additional lessons in basic skills. These met with varying success. Fewer than half the pupils on such programmes attained better than predicted GCSE grades and only six in ten continued into full-time learning post-16. The best provision was very well planned to support work in other courses, was allocated an appropriate amount of time and was accredited, for example through a key skills qualification.

In one school, all staff had details of individual education plans and reported termly on pupils' progress towards their targets. Adjustments were made for pupils to receive extra help with some subjects on a withdrawal basis. Departments encouraged all pupils to enter GCSE examinations and to aim for at least a grade G. Entry-level certificates were offered where necessary and appropriate support was provided. Last year, only 1% of Year 11 pupils left without an approved qualification.

42. Most pupils in the **special schools** visited complete Key Stage 4, and many continued thereafter within the same school. They all had difficulty in learning, a quarter had longstanding difficulties in learning, and the remaining quarter had behavioural problems as well. Their attainment was markedly different from that of the age group as a whole. Fractured experience of education, poor attitudes to learning, medical conditions and multiple social disadvantage often compounded difficulties.

43. The special schools provided the National Curriculum subjects and a good range of opportunities for accreditation. The most effective practice matched accreditation to ability and included GCSE and entry-level awards. A key characteristic of the better practice in special schools was a willingness to adjust programmes to meet individual need, involving very careful tailoring of activities and support in them.

44. School inclusion policies, which encourage pupils with less pronounced special needs to remain in mainstream schools, mean that a growing proportion of those admitted to special schools for moderate learning difficulties (MLD) or severe or profound multiple learning difficulties (SLD/PMLD) have, in general, more severe and complex learning needs than once was the case. Nevertheless, in these schools the pupils often achieved well. Some pupils with MLD achieved GCSE grades in subjects such as art, mathematics and science; others were, through accredited programmes, gaining passes at entry levels and improving their social skills and ability for independent living. Other pupils gained work-related skills at entry level through introductory vocational courses.

45. However, where schools admitted pupils with a very wide range of learning difficulties, achievement tended to be lower. One special school had pupils with severe and moderate learning difficulties and emotional and behavioural difficulties, as well as pupils with autism, and struggled to meet the great diversity of needs; higher-ability pupils were often insufficiently challenged.

46. Attainment in schools for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) ranged from good to poor. In several schools, low expectations and staffing problems contributed to underachievement. In the best schools, astute and adventurous curriculum planning, combined with strong support for individuals, resulted in pupils achieving a range of GCSE certificates, making good progress from Key Stage 3. In one school serving an area of marked social and economic disadvantage, one in eight Year 11 pupils gained five or more GCSE grades at grades A*–C and demonstrated good progress in an area where aspirations were often too low.

## Teaching

47. In the mainstream and special schools visited, the quality of teaching was satisfactory or better in nine out of ten lessons, and good or better in two thirds. It was very good in almost a third of lessons where pupils of very low ability were taught.

48. In over half the mainstream schools, there was a good match between the qualifications and experience of teaching staff and course requirements. However, a third of schools, especially those in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, reported problems of recruitment, with turnover posing a constant challenge for management. The problems sometimes led to unsatisfactory appointments from limited fields or to teach outside teachers' specialist areas. While special schools with a good reputation and strong leadership were generally able to recruit relatively easily where necessary, small special schools often had difficulty in providing a full range of subject specialisms, for example in music, ICT, science, and design and technology. In the case of a mainstream city technology college, a solution had been found in the employment of a high number of part-time staff, many of whom also work in their professional subject field. Over time, the college had supported a number of them to become qualified teachers through its school-centred initial teacher training programme.

49. The best teaching was seen in the more rapidly improving subject departments of secondary schools, as well as in some special schools. It was well planned to ensure that learning objectives take account of pupils' existing knowledge, understanding and skills. It was also lively and professionally reflective.

50. In good lessons, in GCSE, GNVQ, NVQ or entry-level courses alike, teachers:

- offered pupils feedback on how they were doing and what was needed to improve further, and used assessment effectively to improve the standard of work

- made effective use of learning support assistants, mentors and other specialists to support individuals and groups

- improved the literacy skills of both higher-attaining and lower-attaining pupils and promoted study and independent learning skills

- improved pupils' ICT capability effectively

- capitalised on a range of resources including texts, video and those available through ICT

- made good use of expertise available in local institutions and organisations, including employers

- focused deliberately and regularly on applications of concepts and processes in the outside world, including the world of work.

51. In good lessons, pupils:

- were given opportunities for independent and collaborative work, including research, and were asked to explain and justify their approaches to problems, and present their findings

- were regularly encouraged to ask questions and contribute to discussion

- consolidated or developed their literacy, numeracy and ICT skills, learning how to use specialist terminology and methods appropriately

- were helped to see the relevance of what they were learning and applied their knowledge and understanding in unfamiliar contexts.

52. In the following example, the teacher had high expectations of the pupils' attentiveness, their perceptions and, as the lesson progressed, their skills of analysis, reasoning and argument.

To emphasise the value of secondary sources of evidence in contrast to eyewitness accounts, the teacher set up a role-play 'confrontation' with one of the pupils in the group, without the knowledge of the other pupils. Subsequent questioning of 'witnesses' revealed marked differences in factual recall. The excellent teaching, which drew on very good relationships with the group, demonstrated an enterprising approach that enabled pupils to learn effectively.

53. In another lesson, the teacher managed activities into a connected sequence and used classroom assistants expertly.

In a personal, social and health education (PSHE) lesson in an MLD school, pupils were asked to consider potential health and safety issues in the workplace. After discussion about part-time jobs which pupils had had in the holidays and helpful questioning about issues such as honesty and the outcomes of dishonesty, the teacher provided cards describing workplace scenarios for pupils to act out in groups. The staff were skilful in enabling pupils to co-operate with each other, to get the most out of the drama and to decide on strategies for resolving problematic situations and relationships. Excellent flexibility was demonstrated by the staff when they spontaneously acted a possible scenario together to make an important point. The teacher was careful to involve all pupils, who were given good opportunities to express ideas, ask questions and think things through.

54.  The contribution of teaching assistants in **special schools** was often very significant. In some special schools, good liaison between social workers and teachers did much to assist pupils to become more independent and improve their social skills. In the example below, the emphasis on the needs of pupils to carry responsibility and prepare for the activity was a significant factor in the success of the lesson.

Four lower-ability pupils were asked to speak in turn about the challenges they had undertaken. One pupil had arranged a visit to the local law courts. This involved phoning to check details and to arrange transport. Another pupil had booked the school minibus and arranged for the group to go rock climbing at a local indoor wall. Photographic and written evidence was well presented. It was clear that the pupils had solved problems by taking responsibility and working independently, as well as with others. They were all involved in the presentations and were able to talk in a mature way about their work.

55.  The best teaching was compelling and led to rapid gains in knowledge, understanding and skills. In one special school the involvement of literacy and numeracy consultants had a beneficial effect on the quality of teaching and learning across all classes. In addition, the school's arts college status and community links enabled the pupils to learn from professionals in art, music and drama.

56.  However, across the lessons seen in **mainstream and special schools**, too much learning was not as effective as it ought to be, mainly because pupils worked in ways that did not stimulate or challenge them, they were not given sufficient responsibility or there was not enough emphasis on study skills in the context of their course.

57.  Weaker teaching suffered from:
   - low expectations, lack of pace and insufficient challenge
   - incomplete preparation, with a lack of structure in some lessons and insufficient attention paid to the needs of pupils of varying capabilities
   - insufficient analysis of pupils' prior attainment and, consequently, inadequate assessment and monitoring of their progress
   - in some cases, poor collaboration between teachers and support staff, or with other providers involved in the programme, such as a pupil referral unit or further education college.

58.  Where the learning was limited, pupils tended to lack a sense of urgency and there was too much time off-task, either because they were waiting for help or because of their poor motivation. Lack of confidence caused pupils to remain too dependent on the teacher, unwilling to take short cuts and wasting time on trivial tasks. There was often neglect of study skills, and poor attention to the basics of literacy.

## Guidance and support

59. A key feature in all the successful schools visited was the way in which pupils were supported by tutors and other pastoral staff who knew them well, kept their academic progress under careful review and intervened where necessary. Virtually all the pupils interviewed welcomed the attention and support they received, which sometimes came from particular subject teachers who took a close interest in the range of their work and their welfare.

60. More than two thirds of the **mainstream schools** provided pupils with adequate or good careers education and guidance in Year 9 to prepare them for Key Stage 4. These were mainly delivered as part of the PSHE programme; separate series of careers education lessons were rare.

61. Thorough preparation ensured that pupils received timely and detailed information about optional and compulsory subjects. Information included a statement of the school's policy on breadth, balance and relevance, as well as full course descriptions. In addition, opportunities to vary the common entitlement, such as by college or training organisation programmes, were sometimes explained. In the best practice, the implications of choice during Year 9 for decisions to be made at age 16 were outlined and discussed. However, in some schools pupils were unwisely allowed to discontinue a subject in Key Stage 4, which then restricted their post-16 opportunities.

62. At best, careers education and guidance during Key Stage 4 formed a structured programme, including access to interviews with a specialist, use of computer-based programs to analyse aptitudes and interests, discussion with visiting speakers and connections between work experience and the careers programme. Learning mentors often made a valuable contribution.

All pupils have careers lessons within the PSHE course, provided by trained tutors; individual interviews with a careers officer; guided access to the careers library and software collection; and work experience which was often linked to a vocational course taken. Those in the school's programme for gifted and talented pupils have support from a learning mentor.

The school strongly encourages pupils to continue in learning post-16 and destinations for the previous Year 11 pupils were analysed. Emphasis on continuing education post-16 starts in Year 9 careers education and is supported through a well-resourced and conveniently located careers club. All pupils have one or more interviews. They are encouraged to consider appropriate goals and, where these were apparently at variance with family expectations, parents were invited to the school to discuss the matter.

63. Pupils who were interviewed looked forward to post-16 education and training, but both they and their parents voiced some criticism – largely confirmed by this inspection – about limited information on what the transition to this phase was likely to entail.

64. This view was also expressed strongly by many parents of pupils in **special schools**. Parents were concerned about inadequate information on the full range of post-16 options, including those in mainstream school sixth forms, and were relatively unprepared for the practical implications of their child having to travel, join a work-based programme or start a job. Too often, they felt they had little choice of post-16 options.

65. All the special schools had satisfactory and often good support from careers officers. Parents valued their guidance, but wished that the school programme provided better stepping-stones to adulthood, with graduated work experience, college taster courses and preparation for independent travel. Parents felt that work experience and taster courses, where provided, occurred too late in Year 11, limiting choice.

66. Weaknesses also included under-representation of careers education in the PSHE programme or inappropriate timing during the year. Even good careers programmes failed to provide timely and apt guidance for those pupils who attended erratically. Generally, links between special schools and colleges were poor and concentrated on social rather than academic integration.

67. There was some good practice in evidence in the schools.

As part of a careers session the teacher carefully revised what had been covered previously, using the analogy of chocolate-coated biscuits to explain that the pupil could not be expected to choose future pathways without knowing what they might involve. The need to come to a decision gradually, based on increasing knowledge acquired through college taster courses, work experience and the development of social skills, was emphasised. The teacher stressed that there was a need to move from being a pupil with set National Curriculum subjects to a young adult with vocational choices.

Information on post-16 courses, work experience placements and training organisations was provided in sufficient detail to be helpful without overwhelming the pupils and parents. The session provided an excellent preparation for option choices and for positive attitudes to work.

68. Pupils in schools in Excellence in Cities programmes had access to learning mentors. Their contribution was good. Around seven in ten pupils with whom they were involved attained higher GCSE grades than their National Curriculum tests at Key Stage 3 predicted. The same proportion also continued in full-time learning post-16. In the practice described below, use of mentors was planned imaginatively to make the most of work experience.

Pupils benefited from mentor support and were able to match their work experience placement closely to a career interest. The work experience was well structured, and pupils attended for an extended half-day each week, equating in time to a subject option. Their progress was monitored, and there were good communications between school and employer and reports were provided. Although there was no separate accreditation, the work-based learning informed GCSE coursework in subjects such as English and business studies. Seven out of ten pupils involved continued in full-time learning post-16, and a further quarter began employment.

## Action to reduce disaffection and exclusion

69. In four out of five schools visited, the rate at which pupils were permanently excluded was declining. New curriculum programmes and more imaginative teaching made a contribution to the reduction, along with learning mentors, learning support units and individual programmes of support, and the better management of behaviour. Schools with improved behaviour were rarely able, or willing, to identify a single factor as the key; some schools did not in any case analyse the effect of their initiatives on the level of exclusion.

70. **Learning mentors** were often effective in helping disaffected or otherwise troubled pupils re-focus on learning. Pupils valued the one-to-one relationship they developed with well-trained mentors.

In one school, a special unit called the 'I Centre' where pupils received support from learning mentors was central to the falling level of exclusions. Only two pupils had been excluded so far in this year, a rate that would represent a marked improvement over previous years. Mentoring was the key factor. Nearly 100 Year 10 pupils and slightly fewer in Year 11 were being mentored on a regular basis.

71. Some schools linked with LEA-wide programmes, using external mentors to support particular groups of pupils by providing positive role models for them. One such arrangement, known as 'One Hundred Black Men', epitomised economic and social success for pupils from minority ethnic groups and led to some distinct changes in attitude and thereby reduced the incidence of exclusion.

72.    The use of **learning support units** as an alternative to exclusion was generally effective, and especially so where pupils had learning difficulties. Like **further education college courses**, they can provide a fresh start, based on a new set of relationships with the staff involved and explicit attention to improvement in attitudes and basic weaknesses in skills.

Typical of the work in such units was the 'New Horizons Programme' in one school. This forms part of the provision for a limited number of pupils who were at risk of permanent exclusion. The programme, tailored to meet the needs of individual pupils, can involve GCSEs, alternative awards, work experience, additional careers education, PSHE, a 'Compact Club' (concerned with developing pupils' self-esteem), some community involvement, the use of the National Record of Achievement, and college placements. The programme has been successful in raising standards, improving attendance and promoting inclusion.

## Action to improve attendance

73.    A well-designed Key Stage 4 curriculum and a system of close support contributed to motivation and improving attendance in nearly all the **mainstream schools** visited.

74.    In over half of the schools visited, attendance was above, and unauthorised absence below, the national average. It was poor in one in ten schools. Poor or deteriorating attendance was one of the criteria most frequently used by school managers when recommending curriculum modifications for particular individuals or groups. However, special arrangements made in Year 11 were often too late.

75.    Courses organised jointly with further education colleges or training providers led to distinctly better attendance. For some pupils, the different environment, where they feel regarded more as adults, strengthens their motivation to attend. The pupils in one school who were following an engineering course with a training provider were a case in point: they were clearly committed to the course, responded well to the expertise and style of the trainers, and were making good progress towards an award.

76.    Some schools employ staff who have a specific role to improve attendance.

Pupils' attendance at one school had improved with the appointment of an 'alternative provision co-ordinator'. This former education welfare officer linked well with attendance officers, learning mentors, heads of year, the special needs co-ordinator and the assistant headteacher responsible. She also ensured that others involved, including parents and staff in work placements, were well briefed so that they could support the pupils through travel arrangements, for example, and so that their attendance and progress could be monitored carefully.

77. Attendance in schools was helped by a variety of other approaches. In one case, coloured cards were issued, linked to different levels of intervention, and established a clear message for pupils. In another case, there was a 'halfway house' – a permanently staffed room near the school entrance for those reluctant to enter classrooms or those returning after a long absence. For pupils using it, a work schedule was negotiated, and an increasing number of lessons attended until the pupil was ready to go back to a normal timetable. In other cases, a learning support unit provided a clear programme leading to a return to classes.

78. The work of learning mentors was not uniformly associated with sharp overall rises in attendance. The proportion of pupils they mentored whose attendance improved was small, although there were instances where improvement was striking. Where attendance improved markedly through this intervention, early action seemed to be the key. In one school, where the focus was on the whole secondary phase rather than on Key Stage 4 in isolation, early intervention by learning mentors was successful in improving attendance, which had risen from 60% to over 90% as a result.

Form tutors identify pupils whose attendance was poor or deteriorating or who were becoming disaffected. The learning mentors run weekly one-hour sessions where pupils who were withdrawn from lessons follow programmes matched to year group, such as 'How to succeed in school' (younger pupils from Years 7 and 8), or 'Why come to school?' In Key Stage 4, 'Employability – what happens if you don't go to work?' was a theme. The Key Stage 4 work also had a specific focus such as managing behaviour, developing social skills and raising self-esteem. The combination of clarity of purpose, a sustained cycle of planning and determined efforts contributed to the marked gains.

79. Attendance was generally good in most **special schools** for pupils with SLD and MLD; however, absence for medical reasons could have a significant impact on the achievement of pupils by Key Stage 4. In a minority of schools for pupils with MLD, attendance was unusually poor and little effective action had been taken.

80. Schools for pupils having EBD often have an admissions waiting list, one reporting five applications for every place. Pupils who were 'waiting' in practice often receive either a small number of hours' weekly tuition from a home tuition service or none at all. These schools also have a minority of pupils whose attendance was poor and exclusions from them continue steadily, reflecting the degree of difficult behaviour. One school could identify more than half its Key Stage 4 pupils who were young offenders and another had a high proportion of pupils with mental health problems. Around one in five of the pupils at such schools live in public care.

## Management

81. The schools generally managed their overall Key Stage 4 arrangements well. The quality of leadership and management was good or very good in about half of the mainstream schools and in three quarters of special schools.

82. Where management was effective, a clear emphasis, emanating from the senior management team, was placed on raising standards of attainment. In some of the best schools, high staff expectations were readily apparent and the focus on raising attainment was fully embraced by year teams and the subject departments alike.

A particularly strong feature of the school's approach was the way the headteacher placed the onus on year tutors to improve the attainment of the pupils in their year groups. The year tutors were given additional time and a budget specifically designated to supporting work on raising pupil achievement. The year tutors had to produce action plans and set targets for the attainment of their year groups.

83. Governors in all schools were kept informed about curriculum matters. However, governors played an active part in monitoring the effect of the curriculum on teaching and learning through, for example, subject reviews or formal links with departments, in only about one in ten schools.

84. The monitoring of progress during Key Stage 4 was satisfactory or better in three quarters of **mainstream schools**, good in one third and very good in one school in ten. Generally, the monitoring of progress on the GCSE and GNVQ courses tended to be better than on other award-bearing courses. In part this was due to unfamiliarity with the expected outcomes for pupils on the other award-bearing courses and in part to a reluctance to monitor the work of adults from outside the school involved in the teaching of these courses.

85. All schools had sufficient baseline information available to be able to set realistic targets for pupils at Key Stage 4. In the best schools this information was broad-based and well co-ordinated. It included data on attendance, free school meal entitlement, ethnicity and attainment, comprising Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 points scores, together with other measures such as cognitive ability tests or Middle Years Information System (MIDYIS) scores. It was not uncommon, however, for this sort of information to be held in a series of different databases which limited the ease with which it could be combined. Some schools still had difficulty in obtaining a complete set of Key Stage 2 data. Nevertheless, by the end of Key Stage 3 all schools had sufficient information to set minimum Key Stage 4 target grades for their pupils.

86.  Most schools made good use of prior performance data to set individual pupil targets. A variety of systems were used, including predictions based on cognitive ability test scores and Key Stage 3 assessments, Year 11 Information System (YELLIS) and home-grown systems. Each system was well managed and understood by staff. Beyond its use for target-setting, other data analysis of, for example, attainment by gender or ethnic group, was limited.

87.  In one in four **special schools** there was insufficient monitoring of the Key Stage 4 curriculum and of pupils' progress. Some special schools were using databases to record progress and to aid target-setting, but many were not yet at this stage of development.

## Summary

88.  Where monitoring of pupils' progress in **mainstream and special schools** was very good:
   - procedures and expectations were clearly specified by the school's senior managers and regulated by policy
   - there was regular, often termly, collection and analysis of teacher assessment data
   - observation of teaching and learning was undertaken by subject leaders as well as by senior managers
   - there was a regular review of the work of subject departments, as in the following example.

The quality of monitoring and evaluation at both senior and middle management levels was very good. The use of data to monitor progress was good and developing. Target-setting for individual pupils was established in all subjects. Senior managers had a thorough and regular system of departmental review. Lesson observation and pupil tracking were regular features of their work. The approach adopted by the senior management team was both probing and sympathetic.

89.  Where monitoring was unsatisfactory or barely adequate, senior managers typically delegated it to subject leaders and played no active part themselves; baseline information or targets were not shared consistently with subject leaders and monitoring of progress tended to be retrospective, for example at the end of the key stage rather than throughout it.

# Pupil referral units and centres

## Summary

- In the best provision visited, pupils benefited significantly from the personal attention and support they received. Their attitudes, attendance and behaviour improved and they re-engaged with learning. Encouraged to work towards learning objectives, they gradually acquired a sense of direction and grew in self-confidence and in their capacity to interact sensibly with others.

- The curriculum offered in the units and centres was generally limited and often pupils were not working towards recognised qualifications. When they were, attitudes to learning were markedly better and achievement was higher.

- Two out of ten lessons seen in the pupil referral units were unsatisfactory; the quality of teaching was worse in the centres. Key problems were a lack of qualified teachers and discontinuity in staffing.

- For pupils in the units and centres, careers education and guidance was too often late, narrowly defined or fragmented.

- The quality of leadership and management varied greatly across the units and centres and was unsatisfactory or poor in a quarter of them.

- Poor data collection and analysis meant that staff often could not demonstrate the extent to which pupils' attainment, attitudes and behaviour had improved.

## Units and centres visited

90. Pupil referral units are managed by LEAs and provide education for pupils who have been excluded from school. The survey also covered centres managed by LEAs which have the characteristics of pupil referral units but are not formally registered as such. It was not at all clear from discussion with LEA officers why these centres were not registered. One consequence is that they are not subject to regular Ofsted inspection.

91. Most of the pupils in the 14 units and centres visited had either been excluded from their last school or had been in danger of being so. Others had school phobia or had been out of school for other reasons for extended periods. Boys outnumbered girls by more than five to one. Almost all pupils had attainment levels below the expected level for their ages.

## Curriculum policy and organisation

92.   The visits were made before the requirement for 25 hours of supervised education was introduced in September 2002. In almost all the units and centres, provision was part-time, usually around 15 hours of teaching a week.

93.   Improving attitudes was a main focus for many settings, and their programmes usually emphasised social learning and personal development. The subject provision made by the units and centres – which are not expected to meet National Curriculum requirements – was generally limited. Only half provided opportunities for accreditation through the GCSE, although some worked towards entry-level certificates related to the GCSE instead, such as certificates of achievement or key skills.

94.   In some of the settings, most pupils developed a commitment to longer-term success through re-engaging with learning in some form or other. Pupils' attitudes to learning and behaviour were markedly better and achievement in learning was higher when pupils worked within a structured curriculum towards the GCSE or other recognised qualifications. The pupils interviewed preferred working for qualifications, as this gave their work structure and purpose. Where there was little or no accreditation, pupils felt they missed out. In the best cases, pupils were able to appreciate the links between their current work and courses available post-16.

95.   In the **units** visited, pupils usually took English and mathematics, and often did ICT. They usually had opportunities to gain external accreditation in English and mathematics. Subjects sometimes covered by certification were science, art, child development and, occasionally, humanities. Other external certification included the Duke of Edinburgh Award and local schemes of careers education. In some cases, units offered a good range of courses leading to qualifications, as in the following example.

The unit was one of several run by the LEA Behaviour Support Service. A reasonably broad curriculum was provided, with opportunities for pupils to gain external accreditation. All pupils were expected to take GCSEs in English and mathematics plus three optional subjects from English literature, science, expressive arts, humanities, child development, art, textiles and physical education. Courses in PSHE, careers education, library skills, social skills, citizenship and a pre-driving course extended the range. Many pupils gained qualifications exceeding their expectations and their confidence and ambitions grew as a result.

96. The majority of **centres** did not provide opportunities for pupils to gain accreditation through GCSE or entry-level qualifications, mainly because staff were not qualified teachers and did not feel confident to teach the GCSE. In these cases work commonly lacked an educational focus and was poorly matched to needs. However, several of the centres provided trade courses, such as bricklaying, catering, painting and decorating, taught by instructors. For the most part these courses provided a reasonable preparation for post-16 vocational courses at further education colleges or with training providers. Pupils and their parents valued pre-vocational work of this kind, but also regretted the lack of opportunity to gain qualifications.

97. Pupils valued curriculum enrichment through visits to the theatre or sporting events and through residential experiences, and some were sharply aware that they had been excluded from such visits in their schools because of their poor behaviour. In some centres pupils were given good opportunities to work together as members of a group, for example in outdoor activities or residential experiences. The enjoyment and rewards of this type of experience were illustrated by one pupil's comments.

*'Really good trip – excellent people. You can talk and they [the staff] listen. No one usually listens to me. Some people get on your nerves and you just have to ignore them. We had to cook for ourselves – that was OK. It was cold, but we all helped to get the twigs and start a fire. I've never done that before – it was really warm!'*

98. Despite the emphasis given in policy statements to social learning and personal development, not all the units and centres were good at encouraging these. In a few, the provision was not well grounded in an analysis of difficulties and programmes to overcome difficulties were haphazard or lacked purpose.

99. Units for pregnant schoolgirls and schoolgirl mothers were invariably an exception in this respect. The provision seen was good. There was careful liaison with health and social services about the girls' medical, social and educational needs. One LEA ran a specialist unit with timetabled lessons that covered GCSE English and mathematics, together with ICT and childcare. In addition, pupils' stronger subjects were supported where possible through links with their school. In this unit all the girls benefited from careers advice and most intended to take up college courses. In other units, girls were encouraged to keep contact with school and subject teachers after babies were born; and there were facilities for individual tuition, supported by home visits and self-help and social groups with a regular schedule of speakers and workshops.

## Teaching

100.  The quality of teaching in the units was satisfactory or better in eight out of ten lessons, which was below the average for the schools visited in the survey and nationally. Teaching in the centres was weaker than this.

101.  The better established **units** had adequate staffing and were able to match staff expertise to subjects quite well; ancillary and support staff were likely to be trained. Two units were significantly understaffed and all centres reported difficulty in recruiting specialist subject staff with experience of teaching young people with difficult behaviour.

102.  **Centres** providing informally for excluded pupils had particular difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff. For most, annual funding, without guarantee from year to year, resulted in fixed-term contracts and the recruitment of hourly-paid teachers or unqualified staff. Teachers tended to move on if a permanent position became available elsewhere, leading to discontinuity in the teaching. In some instances, youth workers or other non-qualified teachers acted as 'facilitators', but without having the expertise to guide learning effectively. Some centres overcame this by using consultant teachers from further education colleges.

103.  The strength of relationships between staff and pupils was a significant feature in good lessons in both units and centres, with teaching assistants often contributing valuably. Good relationships were underpinned by definite rules about behaviour and the use of praise to reward genuine progress. Better practice was almost always found where the teachers and support staff were both well-qualified and experienced in working with disaffected pupils. There were clear benefits when specialist teachers with a good knowledge of pupils' abilities and personal needs set high expectations in lessons for tasks that were closely linked to the requirements of the courses being followed. Such lessons had a clear purpose. Activities were carefully organised and linked to maintain interest and momentum; they were adjusted to take account of pupils' responses, which were sometimes highly unpredictable. Staff encouraged pupils to achieve their objectives so that they gradually acquired a sense of direction, growing in self-confidence and in their capacity to interact sensibly with others.

A group of five pupils were taking GCSE mathematics and working on individual projects. The lesson was well planned and structured, and learning objectives made clear. Pupils tried their best and relationships were good. Portfolios of coursework were well organised; marking was detailed and informative, giving feedback on how to improve. Near the end of the lesson the teacher reviewed the progress made and standards of behaviour, encouraging pupils to aim for the very best grades they could manage.

104.    Where teaching was unsatisfactory, it was often because unqualified or non-specialist teachers were insecure in their subject knowledge and did not manage behaviour well. Lessons lacked structure, interest and challenge. Planning often did not make explicit the intended outcomes. In some instances resources were out of date, unappealing or very limited in quantity.

## Guidance and support

105.    When offered an appropriate and challenging curriculum and supported by good teaching, many pupils made good progress. They appreciated what they saw as a more adult environment than their previous schools and felt that they were treated with respect. Pupils enjoyed opportunities for individual discussion, and appreciated the efforts of staff to understand and help them deal with their problems. They were pleased when teachers acknowledged their strengths – but were also scornful of unwarranted praise.

Pupils attending the unit were aware that it was their 'last chance' and were keen to make the most of it. A group of vulnerable Year 10 and 11 pupils were lively, polite and articulate about the contrasts between their previous schools and the unit. They were particularly positive about the way they were treated, often describing this as 'adult'.

106.    For pupils in the units and centres, careers education and guidance was too often late, narrowly defined or fragmented. Careers interviews, visits, college taster courses, support from learning or business mentors, and other adults helped only the more fortunate develop the confidence to decide their future route. Pupils enjoyed careers education and, where it was well taught, developed confidence about their futures and a commitment to continuing to learn. The pupils valued advice they received about further study or jobs and were clear about their next steps.

One centre provided sharply focused careers advice which identified opportunities that many of the pupils had previously considered to be impossible. None of the pupils had attended school for some time and arrived with little idea about their futures. A specialist careers officer interviewed each of the Year 11 pupils and accompanied them on college visits and helped them with application forms for courses and for employment. Most of these 13 pupils had jobs or courses to begin the following year. One pupil studied music at the unit, joined a youth choir that performed publicly, and subsequently enrolled onto a college music course.

## Action to improve attendance

107. Poor or irregular attendance, sometimes compounded by repeated periods of fixed-term exclusion from previous schools, was a key factor accounting for the low levels of achievement of nearly all pupils.

108. Attendance at units and centres was below 90% and, in some, well below this. Occasionally, average attendance exceeded 90%. That said, the attendance of most pupils was significantly better than it had been at their previous schools.

## Management

109. The quality of leadership and management of units and centres varied greatly. It was good or better in around two thirds and unsatisfactory or poor in a quarter.

110. Practice was almost always better under the leadership of qualified teachers. Heads in the better units and centres benefited from effective line management, the support of peripatetic specialist teachers and professional dialogue across the LEA. When these elements were in place, the approach taken by unit or centre staff was consistent with that in the local mainstream schools, and this enabled some pupils to re-integrate more easily. Staff tended to emphasise the importance of external accreditation for the pupils as a way back in to mainstream provision, whether pre- or post-16. The units also tended to have sound arrangements for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning. The absence of external monitoring of centres operating informally as pupil referral units hindered the development of good management practice.

111. Arrangements between mainstream schools and the units and centres on the transfer of pupils were often flawed, with records not provided or sought and protocols on information-sharing lacking. Where transfers were managed well, the expectations of pupils were more appropriate and their progress in adjusting and in learning was quicker. Although some units assessed pupils when they were admitted, few subsequently gathered and analysed data in ways that enabled them to demonstrate improvements in pupils' attitudes, behaviour and attainment.

# Other forms of alternative provision

## Summary

- The quality of the curriculum in alternative education projects was uneven and often poor. It was better in provision run by training organisations and further education colleges. In the weakest projects, the young people were merely kept out of harm's way with desultory or diversionary activities.

- The few projects with an effective curriculum programme used pupils' needs and interests as a starting-point, provided activities different from those in school, incorporated a work-related component and, crucially, had high expectations of work output and appropriate behaviour.

- Most projects were unable to promote re-integration in mainstream schools since the courses they offered did not connect well with qualifications. Only half the training providers gave opportunities to gain recognised qualifications, and those that did so offered too limited a range.

- Nearly a third of the teaching in alternative education projects was unsatisfactory; this was often associated with a lack of qualified teachers.

- Despite weaknesses in the curriculum and teaching provided, pupils attending alternative education projects often improved in self-confidence, their ability to relate to others and their general maturity. Pupils' attendance was generally better than it had been at school, although attendance records were unreliable in some projects.

- Only a quarter of alternative education projects had good leadership and management. Project managers spent valuable time seeking funding from a variety of short-term sources and this hindered their efforts to improve what they offer.

- The management of programmes for pupils linked with Youth Offending Teams was usually satisfactory, but curriculum planning was a common weakness. The quality of provision was affected by poor communication about pupils' prior attainment and capabilities.

- The progress of pupils was not adequately monitored or accounted for in many of the settings.

## Provision visited

112.  Around half the **alternative education projects** visited provided for excluded pupils or pupils who move between schools. The projects were usually run by voluntary sector organisations. Some offered full-time provision – or, at least, the only provision attended by the young people. The remainder offered part-time placements for pupils who attend school for part of the week.

113.  Most of the pupils in these projects were boys. Typically, they had been out of formal education for more than two years and had poor literacy, numeracy and personal skills. Many had a history of involvement in crime. Around two thirds of the projects had a high proportion of pupils with learning or emotional difficulties. The projects sometimes also provided for pupils from asylum-seeker and refugee families.

114.  **Training organisations** provide work-based training for young people. The pupils in their programmes belonged to one of three main groups: those who had not attended school for a long period, such as excluded pupils; pupils who attended the training provision for two or three days each week and school on other days; and pupils who attended a part-time course as part of a vocational programme they were following in school. Among the pupils catered for were those who had moved from area to area during Key Stage 4 and had been unable to attain a school place, pupils from refugee and asylum-seeker families, and some who had taken themselves out of school.

115.  Sometimes **further education colleges** provided for school-age pupils, ranging from very small numbers to several hundred. Types of provision varied widely.

[1] Local authorities, in partnership with police, probation and health services, are required through Youth Offending Teams to deliver or co-ordinate a range of youth justice services, based, in respect of 10–17 year olds, on the principles set out in the Children Act 1989 and the Children and Young Persons Act 1993. These principles include an acceptance that all young people who offend are children in need and the provision of community-based measures aimed at diverting them from crime.

116.  Pupils in provision organised by **Youth Offending Teams** were either excluded from school or had taken themselves out of school.[1] The majority were boys. Most had attended school very infrequently, with half those interviewed citing bullying as major causes of their poor attendance. Most had become offenders at an early age. Their offences included theft, violence, public order infringements and vehicle-related crimes, associated in many cases with drug habits. A high proportion of them lived in the care of their local councils. Many had special educational needs.

## Curriculum policy and organisation

117. Overall, curriculum provision in alternative education projects was uneven and often poor. It was better in provision run by training organisations and further education colleges.

118. A common problem for many **alternative education projects** was that they catered for too wide an age-range of young people, often from 14 to 21. This was unsatisfactory for both the younger and older learners. Another problem was that some school-age pupils joined the projects in Year 11 for only short periods of time.

119. Many projects were not organised well enough. The absence of individual learning plans and effective record-keeping denied the pupils a clear sense of purpose. The approach used sometimes gave the very strong impression of a concern merely to 'keep them occupied', so that activities without any educational or even social objectives, such as trips to ice rinks and bowling alleys, became a substitute for a worthwhile programme.

120. No pupil had access to the full National Curriculum, or anything like it. Many project leaders and staff believed they should be offering a more balanced and structured curriculum, but did not have the skills, experience or access to educational advice to help them with this task. Most projects were not able to re-integrate pupils into mainstream schools because their programmes did not match those offered in schools.

121. A third of alternative education projects offered a curriculum that focused on basic skills in literacy and numeracy and emphasised personal and social education, often through outdoor pursuits or art and craft activities.

122. The more effective programmes enabled pupils to make progress, socially and as learners, using their needs and interests as a starting-point. Activities were distinctly different from school, often with a strong work-related component, and staff had high expectations of work output and standards of behaviour. Some projects provided a flexible programme of learning incorporating work towards key-skills accreditation. This was much more common in projects where placements were long term. In the projects offering longer-term programmes, eight out of ten pupils returned to full-time learning in mainstream settings, usually a college or training provider, and were well prepared for transition. The best projects made good use of expert visitors, visits into the community and residential experiences.

123. However, even in the more productive settings, the attainment of pupils was seldom monitored and information about the courses they had completed and what they had achieved was not necessarily reported to the LEA, and sometimes was not available at all.

124.  Despite these weaknesses in the curriculum provided and in the monitoring of attainment, pupils' social development was good in many projects. The pupils generally behaved well or reasonably well, were motivated and ready to take some responsibility. Pupils' attendance had usually improved from the level shown at school, and in many cases good relationships with staff and other pupils were evident.

> The staff of the project do everything they can to assist young people with their futures but do not try to force them along a path they do not wish to take. The staff have high expectations of all pupils and consider that motivation is the key to success. They encourage young people to have faith in their ability to learn. One pupil said: 'Before I came here I just thought I would be on the dole like my dad and my brothers. Now I know I can do something. I'm going to college and I will get a job'.

125.  Links between alternative education projects and schools were rarely effective. Where pupils were dual registered (that is, they were on the roll of a school as well as of a project), lack of contact between the project and the school undermined the monitoring of attendance, behaviour and learning. Few projects assessed the pupils on entry and very little information was passed on by the pupils' previous schools, even where the pupils were registered in both places. LEA social inclusion officers and school learning mentors occasionally improved communications.

126.  Only a small proportion of alternative education projects maintained regular contact with parents. Nevertheless, parents interviewed were positive about the effect on their children. One parent spoke warmly of the centre 'opening a new door' for her child.

> *'I would like to say what my daughter has accomplished since she went to the project. She has always been shy of meeting people but the staff took her out to places and even got her to go on an overnight trip. She made some friends. They even helped her to get an interview and a place at college. She's now doing brilliantly. The project has helped me as well as my daughter because I was so worried about what she was going to do with her life.'*

127.  Effective **training providers** gave attention to pupils' basic and life skills and developed their ICT capability. They undertook initial assessments and formulated individual learning plans to guide provision and progress reviews. Pupils often had modern apprenticeship at 16 as a goal and saw the work at Key Stage 4 as a preparation for this. The better programmes successfully promoted work readiness, introduced one or more skill areas and developed an understanding of the personal responsibility needed in modern apprenticeship.

128.    However, the range of vocational awards available to the pupils was much too limited. Only half the training providers were able to help pupils gain recognised qualifications. There was a wide range of local accreditation, but this seldom supported transition to post-16 courses and had little value when a young person transferred to another part of the country. It was not uncommon for training providers to offer pupils vacancies on programmes designed for post-16 students when, in fact, accreditation was not possible for them.

129.    Almost all pupils attending training provision were motivated to do better than they had at school. After some success in practical work, a sense of achievement developed, leading to better attendance and attainment. For some pupils who were dual registered, or who attended on the basis of normal curriculum arrangements, attainment at school also improved, as did attendance and punctuality.

One scheme was managed by a local education/business partnership in conjunction with the local LSC and the LEA. More than 400 pupils had taken part. The two-year work-based vocational programme was built around NVQs. Admission and induction were at the start of Year 10 and pupils attended one day each week. Pupils limited in literacy and numeracy skills often needed a great deal of help with the underpinning knowledge for the NVQ.

The partnership provided pastoral care and reported progress to the schools at regular intervals. Achievement in the programme was improving. Around half the first group achieved a level 1 NVQ or equivalent and around 70% completed units. Retention in full-time learning or work-based training had improved over the last two years, from about 65% to around 90% for the latest group. Evaluation of the project was through a contract with a university.

130.    Training providers had some success in supporting pupils who had been excluded from school, in some cases through one-to-one coaching.

'Michael' was in Year 10 and admitted he was consistently disruptive in school. He was allocated a mentor and counsellor during Year 8, but little improvement resulted. He resented the counsellor and did not see his mentor frequently enough. The situation deteriorated; there was a violent incident and he was permanently excluded. The governors offered him a place with a training provider. The first three months were difficult and he did not co-operate with any of the staff. However, since receiving one-to-one tutoring and encouragement, his behaviour had improved steadily. He related well to his new mentor and was progressing in his work. The organisation was capitalising on his interest in cars by looking for a placement for him as a car mechanic.

131. Arrangements between schools and training providers for pupils to work part-time at both locations were often more successful than those between schools and alternative education projects. In the good practice observed, initial assessment was carried out and resulted in the formulation of an individual learning plan that focused on basic literacy and numeracy and vocational work. These programmes linked well to subjects taken at school. The combination of distinctiveness and coherence in the programmes were keys to their success.

'William' was in Year 11 and his school had offered him the option to study a vocational course at a local college instead of taking science lessons. His school was offered 15 places on the construction course. 'William' started basic joinery skills in Year 10 and moved on to brickwork the following year. He has decided to continue at college post-16 and was taking an intermediate GNVQ in the built environment. His intention was to go full-time to the college when he was 16 and aim for a BTEC National Diploma. In the longer term, he aimed to go to university to take a course relating to construction. He felt that the course offered him something that he was good at.

132. The nature and the quality of provision in **further education colleges** varied widely. In one instance, a further education college programme had developed expertise over many years through work with young people for whom full-time mainstream schooling had proved inappropriate or who did not attend school. Annually, around 200 applications were received from schools, parents and a variety of agencies. One in four applicants was admitted.

Of 50 pupils admitted to the college programme in 2002, 38 completed a course. Of these, almost half achieved approved qualifications at levels 1 or 2, one in five achieved approved qualification units at these levels, and about the same proportion were awarded locally developed course certificates. Fewer than one in ten left with no award. In the following academic year, more than half enrolled on mainstream courses at the same college, and about one in ten at other colleges.

## Teaching

133.    The teaching in the projects, training centres and further education colleges was satisfactory or better in about seven in ten lessons, a figure which compares unfavourably with that in secondary schools. Across the range of provision, the good teaching was mainly in vocational subjects that, in addition to their work-related dimension, contributed to learners' personal and social development.

134.    The proportion of good and very good teaching in the **alternative education projects** was very small. Many tutors had qualifications and skills in other fields, such as counselling or outdoor pursuits, were experienced in working with disaffected young people and had a good understanding of their needs. These skills made an important contribution to pupils' personal and social development. In the projects, youth workers, unqualified teachers, trainers and instructors taught most of the lessons. In about a third of the projects there were no qualified teachers and this had a negative impact on the quality of the curriculum, teaching and achievement. Most of the projects also suffered from unsatisfactory accommodation and poor resources.

135.    Too often lessons in the **projects and training centres** were not well organised and there was a lack of pace and urgency in the work. Staff had a poor understanding of curriculum planning and how to support pupils with special educational needs. They often had little knowledge of how to teach literacy, numeracy and ICT and gave insufficient emphasis to them. Opportunities for staff development were negligible.

136.    In the better teaching in all types of setting, well-established rules guided the conduct of work and the tone of relationships. There was a positive ethos in which pupils' contributions and questions were valued and they were encouraged to take responsibility for their learning. In some lessons the use of ICT helped to motivate the pupils as well as improve their literacy skills.

Pupils were learning how to draft their work using ICT and strategies to improve the finished product. One pupil had collected data from a survey and was using a spreadsheet to enter data and analyse them. Another pupil used the Internet to retrieve specific information for a project. The ICT tutor was employed for two days a week and designed programs for the youth worker, who was the main tutor for the pupils. The arrangement worked well. Good work routines had been established and high expectations of behaviour and work outputs set. Very good interpersonal relationships enabled the disaffected pupils to re-engage with learning because they saw the activity as relevant and worthwhile.

137.    A number of vulnerable young people who absented themselves from school for long periods were helped by good teaching.

'Tracy' felt bullied during the first term of Year 7 and stopped attending school. She did not attend school at all over the next three years. Sensitive enquiries and offers of home tuition eventually brought her back to learning. She received an hour of teaching in English and mathematics each day and submitted homework to the centre over the Internet. The provider saw this as a first step, to be followed by social and other group activities when time and confidence allowed.

138.    Most pupils responded well to learning in a more adult environment. Many assumed some responsibility for their individual learning plans and valued group projects requiring team action and practical work with adults. Across the settings, learning was good in about half the lessons. In many cases, pupils' self-esteem and confidence were improved by early success in practical projects, such as brickwork, woodwork, hairdressing and catering, which related to their current career interests. Pupils taking NVQ courses responded well to an assessment process which emphasised step-by-step improvement and identified clear priorities for future work.

'Jimmy' had not attended school for several years and had spent much of his time on the fringes of petty crime. Through this project, he had started to attend regularly and now had some friends. Together they enjoyed the adventurous and physical activities that were the basis of the work. While observing friends scaling a climbing wall, 'Jimmy' remarked on 'how cool it would be to video them'. This was just the signal the tutor had been waiting for and he casually offered to arrange a few sessions at the college for 'Jimmy' to learn about filming. 'It's a desperately modest and fragile start, but the media technology may provide a way forward.'

139.    Pupils were clear about what makes a good lesson and they worked hard when they liked and respected an adult. Many of the pupils had achieved very little at school and had no previous experiences of receiving awards; they therefore valued receiving a certificate of commendation for hard work. In better practice they were encouraged to record their own improvements in log-books or personal files and this helped them acquire a sense that they could do something themselves about their achievement.

140. The majority of young people attending provision arranged through **Youth Offending Teams** had low levels of achievement. Those following courses as a result of Youth Offending Team interventions generally worked on entry-level literacy and numeracy programmes, some of which were based on recognised qualifications. The pupils often improved their self-confidence as a result of taking part in the course, as illustrated by the following example.

'Kelvin' was excluded and in trouble. He was abusing drugs, was violent, had offended in other ways and rarely attended school. He had a very difficult home background. He was now following a prescribed course, attending school regularly and making good educational progress. Although still very immature, he was working in school, was motivated towards a goal, admitted to his problems and was trying to tackle them. Support from the Youth Offending Team supervisor, courses on anger management and advice on diet, as well as reparation orders, had helped him to make progress and to return to education.

## Guidance and support

141. Links with the careers services were satisfactory in most **alternative education projects** but rarely good. In better practice, pupils developed clear plans for transition after Key Stage 4. Even where provision was poor, pupils had an interview with a careers officer. However, college taster courses or experience of work in a training centre were not provided.

142. Pupils attending only **training centres** received little structured careers advice; those on courses linked to schools fared better. Once they were involved in an occupational course, balanced with school subjects, progression routes became clearer. Many pupils expressed the view that careers advice was too little, too late.

## Action to improve attendance

143.    Attendance rates at **alternative education projects** were difficult to obtain as the quality of record-keeping was sometimes poor.

144.    Almost half the projects were new; only two thirds of these maintained attendance records. Records were kept more efficiently in well-established projects. These tended to show significant improvement in attendance compared with previous school records. Pupils often achieved 85% attendance and a few above 95%.

145.    Pupils who did not attend school came regularly because they enjoyed their time at the centres and were enthusiastic about some activities, in particular, work placements and outdoor pursuits. In many cases they developed good relationships with staff and other pupils and began to discuss the problems and difficulties they were facing.

> One 14-year-old pupil who had been excluded from school said: 'You're treated better here – like you were somebody. The work's not that good but I am getting better at reading – I get a lot more help. I come here because I want exams. I can get English and mathematics, so it's worth coming.'

146.    Attendance at some of the programmes organised through **Youth Offending Teams** was poor, and was as low as 25% on some days. The teams reported difficulty in obtaining attendance information from schools.

147.    A major reason for underachievement among such young people was early disengagement from full-time schooling. Pupils experienced embarrassment when they returned to school, even briefly, to find they were far behind their peers and became further alienated. Parents were concerned about their children, recognising the importance of school attendance and achievement, yet some found they had little influence on their children's behaviour.

## Management

148. Only a quarter of **alternative education projects** had good leadership and management. The best-led projects were characterised by clear aims and sound philosophy, a strong sense of purpose, clear expectations of behaviour and work and careful monitoring of the pupils' progress. They demonstrated excellent commitment to the needs of disaffected young people.

149. Other projects often had co-ordinators who were enthusiastic and maintained good relationships between staff and pupils. But, in the main, co-ordinators lacked management skills. They did not plan ahead or set targets because of the climate of uncertainty generated by their annual funding. They spent valuable time seeking sources of funding which could have been used to improve the quality of the provision. As well as not maintaining accurate attendance registers, some did not collect or analyse pupil achievement data. They were hindered by receiving very little information about pupils' prior attainment, behaviour and attendance, but undertook no tracking of pupils' achievement themselves. This meant they could not comment on progress.

150. The management of programmes for pupils linked with **Youth Offending Teams** was usually satisfactory. However, the curriculum was seldom adequately planned. Staff caseloads varied widely and, where they were too large, staff were sometimes unable to prioritise their work effectively. Monitoring of the quality of the work was underdeveloped. Management information systems were seldom robust and databases held by different agencies were often incompatible with each other. Systems tended to concentrate on tracking young people through the youth justice system and did not monitor their educational progress.

# Information, liaison, funding and monitoring

## Summary

■ There was a lack of LEA-wide monitoring of alternative education projects, including those provided by the voluntary sector.

■ Liaison between providers was weak for pupils who were at risk of exclusion or who had been excluded. Information exchange between providers was poor.

■ Existing national monitoring of training providers pays little attention to the attainment, progress, social development and care of school-age pupils.

■ Funding of alternative education at Key Stage 4 was uneven. Some alternative education providers relied on short-term funding which meant long-term planning of provision was difficult.

■ Large numbers of pupils were unaccounted for in the later years of education in the areas visited.

## Information about pupils

151.    In the six areas, gains made by all pupils at Key Stage 4 from the provision they received were not clear, as information about their progress and achievement was not collected and analysed fully.

152.    There was generally good information about those who received full-time education in schools. All LEAs provided a statistical support service for their mainstream schools. Where these were effective, schools were provided with a rich source of data, enabling them to set targets at pupil, age-group and school levels, and review achievement and progress against other schools locally and regionally. The best systems provided both comprehensive data and in-service training in their use. Two of the LEAs visited expected schools to provide information about each pupil on roll which goes beyond that collected for the annual census. One, for example, included a request for information about home postcodes, ethnicity, home language, special educational needs and refugee status. This encouraged a deeper consideration of the circumstances of particular groups of pupils and the factors that influence their progress.

153.    However, while mainstream schools were generally well supported by LEAs in information and its use, pupil referral units and similar centres received much less information. Support for many of the alternative education projects was negligible. In general, therefore, information and the monitoring associated with it were weakest in relation to the most vulnerable pupils.

154.   LEAs maintained pupil-tracking systems for the purpose of recording where pupils were and the nature of any special educational needs. In practice, none of the LEAs had a system which gathers and analyses all the available information effectively. Too often, the gathering of information was subject to delays and administrative errors in either the school or the LEA, so that some providers received poor information about the young people they took on.

155.   This problem was reflected in the analysis of achievement in examinations. For pupils who did not have a full-time school education, it was not clear which institution should be credited if a pupil was successful. Where a pupil was dual registered while attending a pupil referral unit, the GCSE certificates gained were credited to the school. For pupils attending alternative education projects, on the other hand, practice varied over which organisation was credited with any qualifications gained. Only one of the six LEAs had made a worthwhile study of the results of courses and had records of the examination success of pupils educated outside school, and even these records were incomplete. In one LEA, dual-registered pupils were omitted from LEA statistics. Difficulties over communications and record-keeping abounded and challenged the ingenuity and resolve of LEA officers. This lack of clarity made target-setting for alternative providers very difficult and hindered pupils' smooth progress into further education, training or employment.

156.   In some of the LEAs visited, the whereabouts of the pupils not recorded as missing could not be reliably established even though it was known that colleges, training organisations, youth services and voluntary organisations provided for many of them.

157.   The most worrying feature of the information held by LEAs was that it clearly did not cover all pupils in the age group. Some school-age pupils were not on school rolls, and while some of them were in alternative provision made by voluntary bodies, training organisations and colleges, and some may have been in independent schools, not all of them were.

158.   Only one of the LEAs visited saw a net increase in the number of pupils in Year 11 compared with the numbers in Year 10 from the previous year. In each of the other areas visited the number of pupils in Year 11 was lower than in Year 10 the previous year. This indicates a net loss of pupils from the education system, as neighbouring LEA areas show no comparable increase in numbers on school rolls. The numbers and proportions vary markedly, with the proportional decrease in the size of the year cohort ranging from 11% to less than 2%. The corresponding national figure was 1.7% in 2000 and has remained steady at that level. The data available, however, compare overall numbers on roll and do not indicate the degree of movement of pupils between schools during the year, which may superimpose further variation. The best estimate – and it is an estimate – is that there were 10,000 15 year olds missing from school rolls in England in 2002.

## Liaison

159.     Liaison between the schools and other providers in the same local systems was generally weak, although it was good between schools and colleges in some cases and improving in other cases. There was good liaison between schools and pupil referral units, similar centres and alternative education projects in only a quarter of cases. Among other things, poor liaison hampered prospects of re-integration into school. Where pupils were dual-registered, lack of regular contact between schools on the one hand and pupil referral units and other providers on the other meant that the monitoring of attendance, behaviour and achievement was inadequate.

160.     Many mainstream schools felt they made good efforts to liaise with pupil referral units and similar centres, a view not shared by many of the pupil referral units and centres themselves. Good information about pupils as they transferred was a rarity. Pupils were much more likely to be re-integrated into school when pupil referral units and other providers forged good links with a school's learning mentor. Liaison was particularly poor when pupils came from schools outside the LEA boundary. However, three quarters of pupil referral units maintained useful links with a variety of agencies such as careers services which provided tutorials, individual interviews and college visits. In a minority of cases, school or community nurses were involved in the curriculum at a pupil referral unit.

161.     Links between Youth Offending Teams and education providers were also generally weak and their relationships with schools were variable. Occasionally YOT staff worked closely with a pupil referral unit, as in this unusual instance.

The unit worked very well with several agencies and individual pupils benefited from good co-operation between the Youth Offending Team and a personal tutor. Community police officers had a high profile in the unit and were seen by pupils as 'friends of the school'. There were effective links with the education social worker who attended the unit for one and a half days a week. A local mentoring scheme also had a very good impact. Close working relationships with local employers were established and these allowed pupils with learning difficulties to practise newly found personal and social skills in a supportive and safe work placement.

## Funding

162.    Funding of provision at Key Stage 4 can vary greatly, ranging from £2,500 to £3,500 per pupil in schools and alternative education projects to £9,000 or more per pupil in special schools and pupil referral units. All the LEAs allocate basic funding to schools and pupil referral units on the basis of a formula using an 'age-weighted pupil unit'. Other providers often do not have financial support from the LEA through this channel and find resources in other ways.

163.    **Training providers** use local LSC initiative funding and payments from linked schools, together with other sources to develop and support work-based training. **Alternative education projects** draw from sources such as: the Single Regeneration Budget; Neighbourhood Renewal; charities; the youth service; social services; Excellence in Cities; Education Action Zones; and the Standards Fund. Most projects were funded from a combination of sources. Alternative education projects, like other providers, need consistent funding if they are to plan effective provision and avoid the problems of short-term planning and unstable staffing.

## Monitoring

164.    Because of inadequate information, none of the LEAs were in a position to judge whether the alternative education projects they were funding were providing value for money. In one instance, the LEA was funding a project to provide 30 places. There had never been more than 15 pupils registered, as prospective pupils were reluctant to join, and the actual unit cost of each place thus exceeded £16,000. The LEA was unaware both of the cost and of the poor quality of provision.

165.    Weaknesses in the monitoring of value for money were a reflection of a more general problem. The alternative education projects visited, in common with the provision made for school-age pupils by training organisations, were not usually subject to any formal external system of quality assurance. External monitoring by LEAs which fund placements, where it happened, was generally weak and had little influence on practice. Inadequate monitoring and evaluation reflected poorly on LEAs, which showed little awareness of the kind of support needed by alternative education projects in particular if they were to make an impact on the vulnerable young people for whom they were working.

# Conclusions

166. There remains much to do to provide a curriculum which closely matches the needs of 14–16-year-old pupils, both in schools and in other provision. However, all of the six areas visited had strengths in what they offered pupils at Key Stage 4, and the majority of pupils in schools and some of those outside of schools had a positive experience in their last two years of compulsory education.

167. Many of the schools in the survey were successfully identifying and providing for the aptitudes and ambitions of their pupils. They were working to develop and refine what they offered in order to improve motivation and enable pupils to make good progress. They offered a broad curriculum with a degree of choice about subjects taken and enrichment of pupils' education through extra-curricular opportunities, including study support. A variety of worthwhile initiatives sought in response to pupils' needs were implemented, for example by giving them the chance to take associated subjects, to take part in enrichment activities, to follow a vocational direction and to engage in extended work-related learning from the age of 14. Imaginative teaching focused on connections between learning in different subjects and built the capacity to learn independently and co-operatively. Equally important was the provision of close personal support and thoughtful guidance. Where such positive features were found they were leading to improved attendance, greater inclusion, better attainment and higher post-16 participation. Close personal support and thoughtful guidance helps to make the difference. High-quality provision of this kind had led to improved attendance, greater inclusion, better attainment and higher participation post-16 in both mainstream and special schools.

168. Across the schools, there was a distinct variation in the range and quality of the provision made for individual pupils and groups of pupils. This was reflected, for example, in the extent to which vocational courses were available and in the quality of careers education and guidance. In particular, the quality of provision for those pupils for whom the standard GCSE programme was not appropriate and through which they have limited success was patchy.

169. For those pupils who did not attend mainstream or special schools in Key Stage 4, the picture was bleaker. Provision for them, including those young people in contact with Youth Justice Teams, was often poor. They were the most likely to receive an inadequate curriculum and unsatisfactory teaching. Although some successfully re-engaged in learning and achieved well, many did not. The more effective pupil referral units, alternative education projects, training organisations and colleges enabled young people to achieve qualifications and re-engage with learning, whether in education or training.

170.	It must be recognised that the providers of alternative education are dealing with vulnerable young people who very often have poor attitudes, low attainment, poor behaviour and very modest ambitions. They have not thrived in school and sometimes have not been in school for a good while. The providers are often not well served by information from the schools from which the young people have come, and in which they sometimes still have a part-time place. Alternative education projects run by voluntary bodies often have a shaky funding base and not much access to professional advice and support on the curriculum, assessment and teaching.

171.	For these providers and for schools, LEA-managed pupil referral units and colleges, managing a curriculum at Key Stage 4 which is more diverse and flexible, both in the type of courses and in their location, calls for high levels of planning, resourcing, communication, monitoring and evaluation. These functions need to be well co-ordinated across local areas. They need to involve careers advisers and employers and, for some young people, they also need to involve social and health services and youth justice.

172.	The local systems covered in the survey were not meeting the expectations for their management which the government's policies for 14–19 year olds imply and call for. The weaknesses of those systems reflect national problems. There are currently no mechanisms for the registration of alternative education providers and no recommendations covering the curriculum and support that should be provided. Funding of alternative education varies greatly and many providers rely on short-term funding which does not allow the programmes to plan development long-term. The range of vocational qualifications available pre-16 is not wide enough at present. There is a lack of recognition of some vocational qualifications in performance tables. There is also no system to ensure that the achievements of pupils outside school are properly included and accounted for. There is limited support for alternative education providers by LEAs and poor monitoring of their quality.

173.	A national development strategy will be required if the educational experience of young people who drop out of school in Key Stage 4 is to be improved.

174.	Finally, action is urgently needed to trace and provide for the large numbers of young people who are unaccounted for in Key Stage 4.