

Local Education Authorities: accountability and control

Recent legislation has greatly curtailed the roles and influence of LEAs. Powers and responsibilities which they previously held have been dispersed to schools, central government and quangos, with implications for local democratic accountability and for the future of LEAs. Hilary Radnor of Exeter University, Stephen J Ball and Lesley Henshaw of King's College London and Carol Vincent of Warwick University have explored the emergence of new forms of school/LEA relationships and of new organisational cultures and practices within LEAs through four case studies. They found:

- f The organisation, practices and cultures, local relationships, powers and responsibilities of LEAs are in a state of flux.**
- f LEA councillors and officers feel that the legislative changes since 1988 have produced serious confusion over accountability and responsibility for local educational provision and quality.**
- f LEA relationships with their schools are now articulated in terms of various versions of 'partnership' which are related to the political control and history, and organisational culture and size of the local authority.**
- f Quality of relationships and services are now the key factor in the way that schools appraise and give support to the continuance of LEAs. LEA service provisions are now organised within and articulated in terms of contractor, client and customer relations.**
- f School headteachers and governors are virtually unanimous in their sense of empowerment and enhanced effectiveness resulting from the devolution of budgets and control over staffing and premises; although primary headteachers generally express less confidence with their new executive functions.**
- f Governing bodies are now, in most schools, the major locus of influence, guidance and support to headteachers. LEA councillors and officers express serious reservations about the extent of autonomy and degree of control now exercised by headteachers, and the lack of appropriate skills, unrepresentativeness and lack of accountability of governing bodies.**

Background

In education, as in other areas of social policy, the last decade has seen profound changes to the relationship between central and local government. Little remains of the considerable planning, policy-making and accountability roles which were vested in LEAs prior to 1988.

The delegation of budgets to schools (local management of schools), the move of some schools to grant-maintained status ('opting out'), and reductions in and limits upon local government funding and expenditures, together with the requirements of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT), have greatly curtailed the size and scope of LEA activities and have driven the replacement of political/bureaucratic forms of organisation with business/management forms.

Some LEAs find the new forms of local governance conducive and see themselves as *agents* of central government. These authorities are exploring possibilities to extend and develop the existing policy framework. Others, that are unsympathetic to many aspects of these new forms, interpret their role, to an extent, as an obstacle to central government. They continue to give primary emphasis to their *representative role*, trading upon their residual moral and political authority within their locality. A third group sees its role in more *pragmatic* terms as that of maintaining and servicing a local system of education and responding to policy by accommodation and compromise.

Headteachers and LEAs

Virtually all LEA headteachers interviewed wanted to maintain a relationship of some kind with their LEA, stating quite clearly that the LEA should continue to exist. However, all the headteachers were highly conscious of the advantages to them arising from changes in the nature of this relationship since 1988. Very few expressed any wish to return wholesale to the pre-1988 arrangements.

Primary school headteachers interviewed were less comfortable with the changing relationship than the secondary headteachers. They still rely on LEA officers to give them guidance and support across a broad range of financial, management and curriculum issues. However, some primary headteachers were now unsure whether their LEA wished to or were able to 'be supportive'. Within the secondary sector the headteachers were very positive about the advantages to them and their schools of the devolution of budgetary control and the direct employment of staff etc. They now view and evaluate their LEA almost entirely in terms of the extent it

serves the immediate needs of their school.

Given these changes in the balance of power between headteachers and local authorities, continuing relationships are dependent both on the development of good personal and professional relationships between headteachers and LEA officers and the establishment of satisfactory exchange relationships (whereby commitment/support from schools is exchanged for good efficient services from the LEA; their formal relationships are contractual and financial). The differences in headteachers' attitudes (both in the LEA and grant-maintained sectors) towards their LEA is typically based upon their views of the professional competence of LEA personnel and the quality of services on offer. It is certainly not the case that LEA schools always have a more favourable view of LEA services than grant-maintained schools or that all grant-maintained headteachers regard LEAs as unnecessary. The Funding Agency for Schools does not act as an LEA in relation to grant-maintained schools as its concerns are primarily with the financial probity of grant-maintained schools and it is not accountable to the local electorate.

Accountability

LEAs are now operating in a kind of organisational and political twilight world where little is certain. Many responses and working practices are now ad hoc and temporary, even on occasion ramshackle. Issues of accountability and democratic politics are often elusive and obscure. The practical enactment of legislation both relies upon and allows for the continuation of residual practices and relationships and has generated a new set of informal relationships and 'surrogate' systems of accountability such as Chief Officer advisory groups, consultative panels and personal advisers. Concomitantly council committees are becoming less important. New forms of political management are emerging, with a greater emphasis on informal arrangements for strategy formulation and planning. While these may help 'make things work' they do not remove the overriding sense of uncertainty (and the attendant frustrations) which currently invest many aspects of LEA activity.

One of the key areas of incoherence arises from the evident contradictions between the conception of the role of LEAs in the 1944 as opposed to the 1988 Education Act. While the 1988 and subsequent Acts (1992 and 1993) give to or leave with LEAs certain responsibilities for the servicing, monitoring and management of local education, they also dissolve the essential notion of the schools of a local

authority forming a 'system'. Virtually all the Authority-based respondents, irrespective of their political persuasion, thought the distribution of powers was now inappropriately skewed. From their point of view the need for a local or regional, representative education authority of some kind, with appropriate planning and spending powers was clear.

LEAs

The research indicates three emergent or transitional interpretations and enactments (models) of LEA accountability; although the differences between them are sometimes subtle rather than clear-cut. In each case, in different ways, issues of democratic accountability are cross-cut and confused by concerns about service accountability within these models.

Model 1 Here attempts are made to relate service provision to community needs and interests. Relationships with schools are carefully separated out from those with parents/students. Equal access is a key criterion of system performance and the LEA acts as advocate for student and parent interests. The LEA also sets local social and educational priorities and works with schools to achieve these. In the 'calling to account' of councillors and officials the realisation of social principles as well as the costs and effectiveness of provision is important.

Model 2 Here emphasis is primarily upon service provision itself with relationships with schools to the fore. The smooth running of the local system rests in good part on the satisfaction or management of diverse interests and the maintenance of a stable consensus about the structure and adequacy of provision. Aspects of an older, more personal form of leadership and 'county hall politics' remain important. Democratic accountability is a deeply embedded sub-text. The political and social functions of education are given little attention and its form and content are taken to be neutral.

Model 3 Here great emphasis is placed upon the quality of provision and business and management methods are employed to ensure efficiency, measured by fixed performance indicators. The Authority may provide services to schools on a business footing but it does not see itself having a responsibility for offering educational leadership or setting social priorities. The meeting of needs here rests upon the actions of individual consumers (parents/students and schools) and is based almost exclusively upon exchange relationships.

Headteachers and governors

Much of the rhetoric of accountability for local education now focuses upon the governing bodies of individual schools. These bodies take on an extra significance in grant-maintained schools, where formal relations with the LEA are ended. Apart from the use of bought-in advice and consultancy, grant-maintained headteachers have no external support other than that provided by their governors.

All the grant-maintained headteachers interviewed were very positive about their governing bodies and seemed to appreciate a strong Chair with whom they could work closely. Even so the headteacher/governor relationship is formally very unclear and nowhere spelled out in documentation from the Department for Education and Employment. In practice the relationship is 'worked out' school by school. In many secondary schools, the process of re-constituting governing bodies to cope with their increased responsibility has led to the co-opting or appointment of business people as community governors. It is often difficult to see such people, who are predominantly white, male and middle class, as representative of diverse local communities. Significantly headteachers portrayed their governing bodies as, and much preferred them to be, non-political arenas and some talked about governors representing the LEA as political nominees as "being a considerable nuisance". Party politics at governor level was not appreciated.

Most governing bodies are 'incorporated' into the school, not external to it. For most governors the interests of their school are separate from and above the more general interests of local youth or the local community. In this sense the many claims about the accountability vested in governors seem unrealistic. Discordant voices are usually unwelcome. From the headteachers' point of view they want an active, skilled and resourceful governing body, but not too active. Headteachers are keen therefore to police the boundary between what they call governance of policy - the province of governors - and management - their concern with the day-to-day running of the school. LEA impact on school policies and management through representation on governing bodies is limited and indirect.

About the study

The study is based on case studies of four LEAs. They were chosen to provide a variation of political control, size, location and history. Key actors within each LEA, both elected councillors and officials, were interviewed, using semi-structured and open ended interview techniques. The interviews explored recent

changes in the structure and methods of local educational government and local relationships and addressed 3 substantive policy and management issues. They were special educational needs, school inspection, and the management of school places. Each provides an example of changing LEA roles and responsibilities. In addition, in each LEA, a sample of other educational stakeholders were interviewed; both about their interactions with and perceptions of the LEA and their views about local accountability. These included headteachers, school governors, and parent representatives. Alongside the interviews members of the research team attended Council meetings, school meetings, parental group meetings and public meetings and collected relevant Council documents, publications and minutes.

Further information

A full report Local Education Authorities: Accountability and Control by Hilary Radnor and Stephen Ball is published by Trentham Books (price £5.95, ISBN 1 85856 063 2). For further information, contact Professor Stephen J Ball, Centre for Educational Studies, School of Education, King's College London, Cornwall House Annex, Waterloo Road, London SE21 8WA, Tel: 0171 872 3163.

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