

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE POLICY PROCESS  
IN A LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY:  
A STUDY OF MICROPOLITICAL ACTIVITY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

There has been considerable debate about how macro and micro studies illuminate the policy process. This study acknowledges that central government has assumed the main responsibility for setting policy for school education. The research examines the way in which such policy is refined and shaped by micropolitical activity in a local education authority (LEA) in England, taking the process for producing four statutory and strategic Plans as the context.

This is a qualitative study undertaken by an insider in the LEA, although I was not directly involved in the preparation of the Plans. Fifteen participants involved in the policy process were interviewed. Micropolitical activity of the individuals who participated in the process is explored; a key component of such activity is the way in which the participants exercised power and influence and how this can be understood in relation to existing conceptualisations of power.

One of the key themes arising from the study is that Elected Members and officers in the LEA, as 'elites', have significant influence on how central government policy is refined. Their influence was moderated to some extent by key stakeholders such as headteachers and governors in the education service who were generally positive about their contributions to the policy process. However, a number of parents who were also involved in the consultations as the Plans were prepared felt that their views were not given sufficient consideration and as a consequence they expressed a degree of frustration with the process. Although there was a commitment to public consultations, many of the important decisions on the detail of the content of some of the Plans were taken in meetings in private between Elected Members and officers.

The research has demonstrated how agenda setting and the management of meetings and consultations can circumscribe the areas for discussion, a matter of which Elected Members and officers need to be aware.

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## GLOSSARY

The following terms relate to the specific local education authority (LEA) which has been the subject of this research.

Term	Definition
Behaviour Support Plan	A three year strategic plan for the development of provision to support children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, identifying multi-agency approaches and support.
Best Value	The duty of continuous improvement for local authorities as set out in the Local Government Act 1999. Councils were required to review all their services over a five-year period to ensure they needed to provide them, they were competitive and they provided value for money. The four 'Cs' characterised this approach – challenge, compare, consult and compete.
Cabinet	A Cabinet was formally introduced by the Council in October 2001 as a result of the modernising agenda for local government. The Cabinet comprised ten Elected Members with specific portfolios of services. A few major items were reserved for the decision of the full Council; thus the Cabinet exercised significant power and was the main decision-making body. Cabinet Members may be assisted in their policy role by relevant Policy Development Groups of Elected Members and other representatives. The decisions of the Cabinet can be scrutinised by a range of Select Committees comprising Elected Members.
Chairman	The Council used this term for the Elected Member who headed up Committees, notwithstanding the gender of the office holder.
committee	Formal meetings of Councillors to discuss policy and other matters in relation to major areas of activity e.g. Education and Social Services. The proceedings were governed by the Council's Standing Orders.
compact	A strategic agreement between an individual LEA and the DfES, which sets out how central and local government will work together to deliver system wide improvement in the education of children and young people.

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
CPA	Comprehensive Performance Assessment – an overall assessment of the corporate functioning of councils introduced in 2002 and undertaken in the main by the Audit Commission. Upper tier local authorities (County Council), metropolitan authorities, unitary authorities, and London boroughs have been placed in one of the following categories: excellent, good, fair, poor and weak. District councils were being assessed during 2003.
Councillors	This term is used interchangeably with Elected Members – these were the elected representatives who comprised the Council. Councillors had a wide variety of credentials and were involved in political power brokering. On occasions Councillors and Elected Members were referred to as ‘politicians’; where I use the term I will prefix it with ‘local’ to distinguish such elected representatives from Members of Parliament.
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment – redesignated the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).
Early Years Plan	Early Years Development and Childcare Plan – the annual strategic plan for the provision of free places for children age 3 to 5 years, and provision of places for the care of children 0-16 years of age, according to their needs.
Education Committee	Committee of Councillors and representatives of bodies and organisations who had a statutory responsibility to consider and agree policy for the education service. Matters relating to schools were usually considered by relevant Panels and two Sub Committees: Strategy and Quality, before reaching the Education Committee for resolution. Elected Member representation on the Education Committee, Sub Committees and Panels was in proportion to the overall representation of the political parties on the Council. Meetings of the Education Committee and the Sub Committees were held in public.
EDP	Education Development Plan – the strategic plan with priorities for school improvement, raising pupil achievement and increasing social inclusion; the first Plan covered the years 1999-2002.

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Elected Members	Sometimes referred to as Members. I will use the terms Elected Members and Councillors interchangeably.
inclusion	I am using this term to denote that children with special educational needs would be full members of mainstream schools and as a consequence will have their special educational needs met in those settings.
LEA	Local Education Authority – it is part of the elected and democratically accountable council. The term is given to a council as it fulfils its education responsibilities under the Education Acts and other relevant legislation.
LSC	Learning and Skills Council – a national body with local arrangements to secure the provision of ‘proper’ facilities for education and training for the 16-19 age group and of ‘reasonable’ facilities for education and training 19+, excluding higher education.
officers	These were paid officials who served the Council; they fulfilled a range of leadership and administrative responsibilities, including the statutory functions of the Chief Education Officer.
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education – an agency responsible to Parliament for the inspection of the quality of childcare, educational provision and LEAs in England.
panel	Meetings of Councillors held in private to discuss the detail of policy; the membership of a panel would depend on the overall representation of the political parties on the Council.
PRU	Pupil referral unit – non-school educational provision managed directly by a LEA having in many respects the status of a school, however, they do not have delegated powers; pupils at risk of exclusion or who have been excluded or who have medical conditions were educated in such provision. Outreach support and advice was provided to secondary schools in the local area from those PRUs which specifically focused on behaviour management.
representatives of the LEA	Elected Members and officers.

Term	Definition
SEN Action Plan	Special Educational Needs Action Plan – the first strategic plan for the development of special education provision covered the period 1999-2002.
Sure Start	Sure Start was an initiative announced in 1998 and was specifically targeted at families with children under four years of age. Sure Start aimed to work with parents to help them ensure their children were healthy, confident and developing their full potential. The priority for these initiatives had been families living in the areas of greatest need.
TEC	Training and Enterprise Councils – private companies established in 1989; most of their work was founded upon contracts for particular services, especially training in a local area. TECs were replaced by the Learning and Skills Council.

## **CHAPTER 1 SETTING THE SCENE**

There is considerable debate about the policy process; in this research I intend to show that the policy process is dynamic, fluid and organic rather than mechanistic and linear. My research seeks to assess the influence that micropolitical activity in a local education authority (LEA) had in refining and modifying central government policy.

This field of study is highly complex in view of the intricate and tangled nature of human relationships which can be seen in micropolitical activity. Indeed because of the inability to conceive of all the permutations and because the environment in which the policy process is set is ever changing, it is not possible to know how policy might develop at its inception (Majone and Wildavsky 1978 p. 107). In order to illuminate this complexity, my research draws on a range of theoretical frameworks as no one or single theory appears to capture the nuances and intricacies of the subject matter.

In this scene setting chapter I will:

- i) identify the rationale for the thesis,
- ii) provide an overview of the policy process and micropolitics;
- iii) outline the research questions; and
- iv) set the context of this research, in relation to the roles of central government and LEAs, and in my professional context.

### **Rationale for the thesis**

The views of those most closely involved in the activities of LEAs e.g. Elected Members and officers (see Glossary and discussion in Chapter 2 on LEAs), have only rarely been sought. It would appear that although there has been considerable interest in the area of micropolitics for over twenty-five years, there has been little or no research into micropolitics and the exercise of power and influence within the policy process in a LEA. Three reasons might go some way to account for this. First, LEAs may not be quite as accessible to researchers as schools because of the difficulties associated with gaining



entry, since some of the business of a LEA is conducted in private. Second, it is possible that studies of the micropolitics in schools could potentially be considered more relevant as they could contribute to school improvement which currently has such a high profile. Third, LEAs may not have been seen as discrete organisations and therefore not so easy to research as schools which have clearer organisational boundaries – thus the web of relationships in a LEA could potentially be seen as more complex than in a school. In spite of these possible explanations, it is still surprising given the democratic responsibilities of LEAs, that no major research project has been undertaken.

In order to keep the study manageable the research is located in one specific LEA in England and centres on the process by which a LEA has prepared four local strategic Plans<sup>1</sup> to meet the requirements of central government. These Plans provide a local context to implementing the priorities in central government policies – one of the roles of LEAs identified by Lowe (2002 p. 158). My research has included an exploration of the interrelationship of the central and local contexts in the education policy process.

A definition of micropolitics is provided in Chapter 2 and includes references to the exercise of ‘power’ and ‘influence’. I am not making a philosophical distinction between the concepts of ‘power’ and ‘influence’ and will be using these terms interchangeably; however, throughout the research it will be evident that in the main decision-makers exercise power whilst those who inform decisions exercise influence.

In using the framework afforded by micropolitics, I am seeking to build on and develop the research undertaken in my institution focused study (IFS) (Durrant 2000) which examined the process of establishing a school organisation committee. This current research, however, is not more of the

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<sup>1</sup> I am using a capital ‘P’ for Plans to indicate that they are substantial, statutory and strategic. The four Plans are: the Education Development Plan (EDP); the Special Educational Needs Action Plan (SEN Action Plan); the Behaviour Support Plan; and the Early Years Development and Childcare Plan. Annex 1 includes the statutory and other background related to these Plans. Annex 2 provides some information regarding the process for producing the Plans.

same. There are some significant differences in data collection which I will outline in Chapter 3. Although I have engaged with the participants who have contributed to the development of four of the key statutory and strategic Plans which were prepared between 1998 and 2000, I have maintained a greater detachment from the operational aspects of the policy process compared to that outlined in the IFS. In that study I was able to interview some of those who were involved in establishing a School Organisation Committee in the LEA and to record at first hand as a participant observer the interrelationships of key actors associated with that Committee. Although this current research continues to use semi structured interviews and the notes of meetings prepared as the LEA record, it was not physically possible to attend all the meetings associated with the production of the Plans, therefore, I was not able to experience firsthand the exchanges between the participants. This research does have significant linkages with the IFS in that micropolitics has provided the framework for analysing how the conflicting interests of individuals and agencies have influenced the policy process. This research is I hope a more extensive and a more mature reflection on some of the discussion of power that I was only able to mention briefly in the IFS.

### **Overview of the policy process and micropolitics**

‘There is no fixed, single definition of policy’ (Ozga 2000 p. 2), therefore, I am taking the view that policy is both product and process. In order to encapsulate these features I refer in this research to the ‘policy process’. This term is also helpful for it suggests that policy is fluid and iterative not least because of the inherent micropolitical dimension provided by the participants who struggle to make their voices heard in the gaps and contradictions in the process. It would be artificial, therefore, to draw any division between policy making and policy implementation. This is a significant area for discussion and I will examine the theoretical framework in Chapter 2.

There is a continuing debate about how far single theory explanations are able to address the complexity and scope of the policy process. Ozga, for instance, has criticised approaches that generate 'a view of policy making which stresses ad hocery, serendipity, muddle and negotiation' (1990 p. 360) and which fail to set micro-political studies of personal relationships within a wider analysis of power. Gewirtz has also indicated that:

It is possible to overstate the messiness, complexity and ad hocery associated with policy implementation. This kind of conceptualisation can obscure patterns of domination and oppression which are being exacerbated by recent policy developments...So much emphasis is placed on the interpretability of texts, the unpredictability of policy outcomes, the complexity of the policy process...that broad patterns of oppression and domination generated by those policies and associated discourses are obscured (2002 pp. 16-17).

Further, Apple has argued that:

There is a world of difference between emphasising the local, the contingent and non-correspondence and ignoring any indeterminacy or any structural relationships among practices (1996 p. 141).

In contrast, Ball (1994a) has indicated that localised complexity is required to do justice to the muddle, negotiations and serendipity of the micro-level activity. Ball sets the challenge to myself and others working in this field to relate:

together analytically the ad hocery of the macro with the ad hocery of the micro without losing sight of the systematic bases and effects of ad hoc social actions: to look for the iterations embedded within chaos (p. 15).

This view is complemented by Whitty and Edwards (1994) who indicate that:

The detail is fascinating and important and only in the detail is it possible to glimpse the complexity of power in its various manifestations (p. 30).

Having considered Walford's views (1995 p. 421) on the advantages of considering both the micro-level interactions and the influence of macro-structural power, I am seeking to use a framework that avoids 'the reductionism associated with both holistic (structure) and individualistic (agency) frames of analysis' (Troyna 1994b p. 336). In view of the

complexity of the policy process I have not found one theoretical framework which has sufficient breadth to encompass the range of the data that I have collected. I have, therefore, used the insights gained from a variety of theoretical positions to inform my analysis of the data. In this respect I started with the research question and then selected the most appropriate theories to inform the analysis.

## **Research questions**

In the light of the general research question I outlined at the beginning of this chapter, I proceeded to identify those people who were involved in the policy process i.e. the Elected Members, officers, headteachers, governors and parents; and how they were involved in the policy process e.g. in consultation meetings and drafting the Plans. It was through this involvement of the participants in the process that I explored micropolitical activity. These elements are at the centre of my data analysis in Chapters 4 and 5.

In addition, as I found myself working through different fields of enquiry, several detailed and contextualised questions began to emerge:

- i) how far the interests of the participants, the maintenance of organisational control, and conflict over policy (Ball 1987 pp. 18-19) influenced the shaping of policy through the preparation of the Plans<sup>2</sup>.
- ii) an examination of the range of, and to a lesser extent the limits to, the influence of Elected Members and officers within the LEA, and the process of engagement, interpretation and struggle internally (cf. Bowe *et al.* 1992 p. 142) and externally with stakeholders.

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<sup>2</sup> I have sought throughout this research to focus as little as possible on the mechanics of producing the four strategic Plans but rather to set their preparation within the policy process. Annex 2 does, however, provide a brief outline of how each Plan was prepared.

- iii) the way in which influence and power have been used, within the political context, taking into account the views of key participants and the contributions of interest groups discussed by Whitty *et al.* (1998 p. 5).
- iv) the way in which local networks of power relations and interest groups with little or no influence were reactive rather than proactive towards policy developments.
- v) how far the individuals and interest groups were able to resist, adopt or contest policies or engage in the process to produce the Plans in the LEA through micropolitical activity, a factor discussed by Penney and Evans (1994 p. 38).
- vi) whether interest groups were able to penetrate the educational policy agenda and could place some limited constraints on the Elected Members and officers in the LEA, general points discussed by Bonal (2000 p. 215).
- vii) how far the evolution of policy was a complex combination of factors and whether there were factors which were both 'top down' and 'bottom up'; for instance how far Councillors and officers had to conform to policies set by central government and had their work determined by a 'technical or instrumental rationality' (Gewirtz 2002 p. 125).

Malen (1994 p. 159) has also asked a series of pertinent questions about the apparently disparate field of micropolitics. In the course of my thesis I have sought to respond to these. These questions may be summarised as 'what are the conceptual parameters and distinguishing features of the field?' and include:

- i) whether micropolitics is much to do about anything – an issue also raised by Hoyle (1999 pp. 213ff.). What is the essence of micropolitics? In respect to these two issues I seek to provide a response in Chapter 2 particularly in my working definition of micropolitics.

- ii) whether and how micropolitics differs from macropolitics. A theme running through my thesis is the interrelationship of macropolitics and micropolitics – in short I would suggest that macropolitics defines the arena in which micropolitics take place.
- iii) is micropolitics essentially the politics of ‘privatisation’, a politics that confines the scope of conflict to safe issues, restricts the game to insider exchanges and puts the emphasis on the acquisition of acquiescence? I hope to show in Chapters 4 and 5 that micropolitics is at the centre of a wide range of relationships and includes both insiders and outsiders.
- iv) is micropolitics a limited set of games in the broader ecology of games (Firestone 1989)? I refer to aspects of games theory in Chapter 2; however, as I shall indicate I have used the metaphor to provide some insights but I do not necessarily see it as an overarching theoretical framework to explain micropolitics.

### **Central government approach to education policy**

A number of commentators have noted the continuity that existed between the Labour Government established in 1997 and the previous Conservative Governments from 1979 to 1997 with regard to choice and markets<sup>3</sup> (cf. Hartnett 1998; Ball 1999; Demaine 1999; Power and Whitty 1999; Edwards 2001; Rikowski 2000) and also indicative of the ‘New Right stagecraft’ (Esland 1996 cited in Leathwood and Hayton 2002 p. 139). Paterson (2003 p. 166), however, has questioned some of the assumptions that there has not been any significant new thinking in New Labour in relation to education policy.

Within the umbrella term of the ‘Third Way’ the two Labour Governments since 1997 have aimed at developing the concept of a stakeholder society

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<sup>3</sup> Movements towards these began in the 1970s.

influenced by 'real opportunity', 'civic responsibility' (White 1998 p. 18) and 'social inclusion' (Levitas 1998). Although there are various interpretations of the 'Third Way', the work of Giddens has been particularly influential; his view of its fundamentals has been reiterated in *The Third Way and Its Critics* (Giddens 2000 pp. 50-54). Prime Minister Blair's 'Third Way' has at its heart the welding together of a neo-liberal emphasis on economic efficiency with the 'left' concerns of equity and social cohesion. The state is to provide a regulatory framework to enable access to entitlements rather than necessarily as a provider (Robertson and Lauder 2001 p. 224) – an approach Le Grand (1997 p. 152) has referred to as 'legal welfare'. The Prime Minister also outlined four key values – 'equal worth, opportunity for all, responsibility and community' (Blair 1998 p. 3) – which underpin the Third Way.

Recognising the complexity within Labour policy in education, Paterson (2003) has concluded that there are three strands of Labour practice:

a renovated version of social liberalism... a form of weak developmentalism... and a type of new social democracy that is in the mainstream of European thinking on the left (p. 166).

An analysis by Leathwood and Hayton (2002 p. 149) of New Labour's educational policies and pronouncements has highlighted their inherent contradictions and tensions and conclude that current policy developments are likely to reinforce rather than reduce educational inequalities, especially as New Labour's policy agenda attempts 'to reconcile social justice and inclusion with capitalism and the market' (p. 150). As a result:

From an ideological perspective, it seems that a form of political pragmatism is a key feature of how New Labour creates education policy and the sort of politics it privileges (Anderson 2001 p. 59).

The Labour Government has given, as it promised, the highest priority to education (Edwards 2002 p. 109) and during its first year in office undertook a comprehensive spending review<sup>4</sup>; as a consequence additional resources were provided to education. This investment was linked to 'modernisation and reform to raise standards and improve the quality of public services'

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<sup>4</sup> There has been a second comprehensive spending review in 2002 to cover the years 2003-2006 – education is still seen as the number one priority for the Government (DfES 2002a).

(H.M. Treasury 1998 p. 1). Public Service Agreements (PSA) were published in December 1998 identifying what the Government would deliver. The aim of the Department for Education and Employment's PSA was:

To give everyone the chance, through education, training and work, to realise their full potential, and thus build an inclusive and fair society and a competitive economy' (H.M. Treasury 1998 p. 9).

Thus Government policy had two main aims: the first to improve educational provision and standards and the second to create a more socially inclusive society. As a result of the Government's overall targets, LEAs have been set their own targets through the strategic planning process. Within this framework LEAs have also been expected to exercise leadership through the preparation of statutory and strategic Plans and encapsulate some vision and values in these Plans. As the Government targeted its resources on specific priorities it has increased its control over the levers of power in the education service. Through a highly technicist approach underpinned by management rationality (Blackmore 1999 p. 39; Clarke and Newman 1997 p. 147), which includes the strategic planning process, and the focus on outputs, LEAs have in essence become the agencies of central government (Hatcher 1998 p. 493) delivering a national agenda of educational improvement. The means by which this agenda is being achieved are regulated through the Education Development Plan, the Code of Practice on LEA-School Relations, Fair Funding (Wilkins 2000 p. 342), and the inspection of LEAs by OFSTED (Ainscow *et al.* 2000 cited in Fitz *et al.* 2002 p. 377). I would add that through the portfolio of other strategic and statutory Plans which LEAs are required to produce, central government is also being helped to achieve its ends. Annexes 3 and 4, adapted from the diagrams in Whitbourn *et al.* (2000 pp. 3 and 6), set out the responsibilities of LEAs and the range of strategies and Plans which they are required to prepare<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Central government is looking to reduce the number of statutory Plans that LEAs will be required to prepare – in part as an outcome of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment and as a policy initiative of central government. The Plans that are at the centre of my research are due to be included in a single strategy for children and young people and a single education plan by 2006/07 (Prescott 2002).



The constraints within the policy process can also be seen in internalised and localised control (Mahony and Hextall 1998 p. 554); thus LEAs are 'caused to behave' (Foucault cited in Marginson 1999 p. 25) in ways which are consistent with the objectives of government (cf. Weiler 1990 pp. 435-6; Marginson 1999 p. 25). Hartley (1998 p. 157) has noted that beneath the guise of quality management and efficiency gains, a straitjacket of standards and procedures is being developed resulting in elaborate schemes of standardisation<sup>6</sup>.

It is not surprising therefore that some commentators e.g. Mahony and Hextall (1998 p. 552) have noted that masculinist and strident language and imagery have permeated the political rhetoric in an attempt to gain a commitment within the education service to the standard of 'standards'. It has also been noted that the promotion of strong leadership committed to resolute decision-making can eliminate the need for responsibility and representation (Mahony and Hextall 1998 p. 555). This may go some way to explain how some decision-making may be regarded as superficial and limited to that which central government might allow.

Further, the technologies and tools that are being used to measure performance are not neutral, as they epitomise specific forms of power and authority. Auditing is not a neutral process as it imposes its own values on the activities that it regulates, with the consequence that the process can have unintended and indeed dysfunctional consequences – 'the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisation is not so much verified as constructed around the audit process' (Power 1997 p. 213).

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly the Education Act (2002) includes provisions for schools for earned autonomy which would encourage greater diversity e.g. in regard to the curriculum, providing services, and organisational arrangements such as federations. However, approval to introduce such diversity has to be sought either from the Secretary of State or from the relevant LEA.

## Subsidiarity of LEAs

The post-war settlement for education was founded on a partnership involving central government, LEAs, and teachers. The previous section, however, has demonstrated the subsidiarity of LEAs to central government and that this partnership has shifted significantly as a consequence of the Education Reform Act (1988) and subsequent legislation. Consequently most of the power has been exercised at central government level (Taylor *et al.* 1997 p. 3) although as I will describe in the next chapter LEAs have functions in the local planning and provision of education (Fitz *et al.* 2002 p. 391).

As LEAs derive their authority from central government they are a junior partner in setting the policy framework for the education service (Wilkins 2000 p. 343) being concerned more with implementing policy and in so doing modifying policy, rather than having a significant involvement in determining the overall direction of education policy. Nevertheless it is important to recall that the elected representatives of a LEA are democratically accountable to their constituents as well as corporately for the decisions of the LEA. Jones and Stewart (2003) have indicated that although some Acts of Parliament give central government certain controls over local government, the latter remains accountable to its own voters and local taxpayers. Further:

To suggest councils are accountable to central government undermines local accountability by fostering the attitude that local government is the agent of central government (Jones and Stewart 2003 p. 21).

Although this is certainly the legal position, the perception of many is that *de facto* local government is increasingly accountable to central government.

Corry and Stoker (2002) have seen signs that central government is replacing 'command and control' techniques by 'steering centralism'; however, they argue that the process needs to go further and embrace a

'genuine new localism' (p. 8)<sup>7</sup>. How far this might be achieved is unclear, however: 'It is clear that democratic accountability will not take precedence over managerial adequacy' (Sharp 2002 p. 213). Indeed Kogan (2002) has coined the phrase the 'Rise of the Compliance Society'. Such coercive compliance has developed as a result of initiatives mainly resting with 'a remotely accountable and technocratic centre'. He goes on to describe how:

the centre was never willing to be an equal partner with local authorities but, much more now, relationships are those of dependency and compliance rather than interaction, negotiation and mutual respect. (p. 340).

Particularly from the time it formed the government, New Labour has given emphasis to stakeholder involvement in many areas of political, social welfare and economic activity. There have been powerful social movements over the last few decades which have resulted in demands for greater democratic involvement in the policy process and, in theory, by 1997 parents had become the dominant partner within the educational policy discourse (Brown 1997 p. 402). This is of particular relevance to my research as parents were a key group which were consulted during the preparation of the SEN Action Plan.

Overall the future of LEAs was very unclear during the immediate years before the 1997 general election, however, since that time there has been greater clarity. I will be exploring the changing roles of LEAs in more detail in Chapter 2.

### **Context of the LEA**

Throughout this research I view the LEA as one entity or component of the state; like the other entities, LEAs have their own interests and it is not surprising, as Taylor *et al.* (1997 p. 30) have indicated, that tensions can develop between these entities. It is also important to note that although LEAs have common statutory functions, one LEA will differ from another in its

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<sup>7</sup> This is based on a need to spread capacity, responsibility and accountability more widely to improve the system of government.

ethos and approach to these responsibilities. Indeed even within one LEA there may be different emphases according to the composition of the Council of Elected Members, the staff involved and the matter under consideration. My research is historically specific and as I shall indicate in the Conclusion there have been significant changes as a result of legislation which have affected the way councils conduct their business, which in turn are having a bearing on the context for micropolitical activity.

The four Plans have been implemented and mediated in the distinctive context of a large county council with its own particular political background, tradition, and socio-economic diversity; these factors have been identified in general by McLean (1995 p. v). During the preparation of the Plans, the Council was subject to local government reorganisation in 1998 and because of boundary changes and realignment of Member allegiances, the political administration changed from a coalition of Labour and Liberal Democrats to one where the Conservatives and Independents had a majority. This complexity had a bearing on the micropolitical activity of the participants.

<b>Composition of the Council during the period of this research 1999 – 2000</b>				
<b>Date</b>	<b>Conservative</b>	<b>Labour</b>	<b>Liberal Democrat</b>	<b>Others</b>
<b>1999<sup>8</sup></b>				
May	38	24	15	2
July	38	24	16	1
August <sup>9</sup>	38	24	14	3
<b>2000</b>				
March	38	24	14	2 Independents 1 Residents' Association
May <sup>10</sup>	40	24	14	1 Residents' Association

<sup>8</sup> Labour and Liberal Democrat formed the Administration Group.

<sup>9</sup> Defections from the Liberal Democrats resulted in no Party having an overall majority.

<sup>10</sup> Conservatives and Independent Group was formed – it comprised the Administration.

Within its administrative area the LEA had a very high proportion of foundation schools resulting in a well-developed market for education services and a significant market in admissions, both of which had a major influence on the approaches and activities of the LEA – in line with conclusions drawn by Gewirtz *et al.* (1995). There had been some resistance to the strategic planning role of the LEA which was reintroduced as a result of the School Standards and Framework Act (1998), as many governors and headteachers of foundation schools, particularly those in the secondary phase, had been maximising their autonomy to develop their schools.

The following table summarises some of the key data about the LEA in 2000.

<b>Schools</b>				
<b>School type</b>	<b>Community</b>	<b>Foundation</b>	<b>Voluntary</b>	<b>Total</b>
Nursery	2			2
First	1			1
Infant	76	10	5	91
Junior	67	11	10	88
Primary	142	37	125	304
<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>486</b>
<b>Secondary</b>	22	50	7	<b>79</b>
<b>Special</b>	21	1		<b>22</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>331</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>587</b>
<b>Number of pupils in schools</b>				
<b>Nursery</b>	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>	<b>Special</b>	<b>Total</b>
4,058	111,588	84,781	1,683	202,110
<b>Pupils with statements of special educational need</b>				
Number of statements			4,916	
% in special schools			39	
% in mainstream schools			50.8	
% in non-x LEA schools			10.2	

Within the context of the changes arising from the School Standards and Framework Act (1988), senior officers within the LEA were particularly aware of the sensitivity of exercising leadership and the importance of undertaking meaningful consultations with stakeholders on policy development. Interestingly parents had been consulted on the development of a relatively small number of strategic Plans and policies previously.

### **Professional context**

This research has provided me with an opportunity to examine within a conceptual framework the influence that micropolitical activity can have on the policy process. Such influence has been particularly important in four of my most recent project management roles within the LEA: (i) the planning of school places; (ii) preparations for the inspection of the LEA by OFSTED; (iii) the proposals to procure a private sector partner to deliver the schools-related services; and (iv) the future organisation of services to schools, and children and their families. In addition the research has afforded me the time to reflect on my role as an officer in the context of LEA staff becoming technician in character (cf. Greenfield 1993c pp. 164-5) as they are involved in 'the smooth and efficient implementation of aims set elsewhere within constraints also set elsewhere' (Gewirtz and Ball 1996 p. 4). Along with my colleagues I am subject to new managerialism with its objective setting, planning, effective management, internal monitoring and external reporting (cf. Hatcher 1994 p. 55; 1998 p. 490) with an emphasis on organisational outputs, encapsulated by the description of 'performativity' (Lyotard 1984 cited in Broadfoot 2001 p. 137), but also which takes into account the dimensions of people, values, commitment and purpose (Clarke and Newman 1997 pp. 140-158). The research has also given me time to reflect on how officers are working in an environment where an increasing emphasis is placed on the practicalities of policy implementation with rather less time being spent on considering the more complex educational principles, the longer-term matters of equity and whose interests are being served (Taylor *et al.* 1997 p.115).

I hoped that by understanding micropolitical activity and the exercise of power and influence I would be better able to understand the policy process for 'to ignore issues of power is to ensure our own powerlessness' (Taylor *et al.* 1997 p. 20). I also thought such understanding would help to improve the quality of my decision-making and would inform the best approach to take account of the views of local communities.

### **Structure of the thesis**

Following this scene setting chapter I will:

- i) provide an overview of the relevant literature in Chapter 2;
- ii) explore in Chapter 3 the methodology which has provided the framework for writing the thesis;
- iii) analyse the data in detail in Chapters 4 and 5; and
- iv) summarise the outcomes of the research in Chapter 6.

My study goes beyond a descriptive case study of participant interaction within a unique context. My research has significance for it seeks to use a comprehensive theoretical framework to illuminate the complexities associated with the policy process. Further, a theme running through the research has been the way in which the data collection and analysis together with the writing of the thesis have interacted with my professional work with each benefiting from the insights drawn from the other.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to create a perspective to understanding my research question of how micropolitical activity in a LEA was able to refine and modify central government policy, I wish to examine and discuss the associated literature. In particular I will assess the implications for my thesis of four main contexts:

- i) the context of the policy process;
- ii) the context of micropolitics using a proposed definition and a discussion of power and discourse;
- iii) the context of the roles and functions of LEAs in so far as they have a bearing on my research and how the concept of 'organisation' can provide an insight into the LEA at the centre of my research; and
- iv) the context of my professional role as an officer of the LEA.

### **Policy process**

#### *A discussion of some of the interpretations of the policy process*

I wish to highlight some of the relevant issues arising from the theoretical models relating to the policy process in my study. I have already indicated that in many respects policy is a process and not merely substance; it is not 'something that happens and then is over and fixed' (Ball 1990b p. 185). The concept has been described as 'fuzzy' (Cibulka 1994 p 106) and policy proposals can be likened to 'a tangled thicket' (Cibulka 1994 p. 122). Thus the policy process would appear to have more to do 'with recipes rather than blueprints, with cooking rather than engineering' (Considine 1994 p. 3).

A policy may include what it is intended to achieve as well and where there is a deliberate decision not to take action; as a consequence public policy can cover a very broad territory (Cibulka 1994 p. 106). Raab (1994b) has concluded that within the field of education the policy process:

embraces a vast range of sites of action, various moments and discourse, from central government machinery through to places where practice is arbitrated. This is a long and elaborate chain, or thousands of them, ...each passing through



a LEA<sup>1</sup> ...[and] none of the points on the chain is a clone of any other at the same level (p. 24).

Although there is a wide range of literature on the policy process in general, there appears to have been relatively little direct analysis of the policy process in LEAs in particular. My research could be said to be located in the policy implementation stage if the policy process is regarded as comprising separate stages involving moving from problem formulation, policy agenda, policy formulation, adoption, implementation, to evaluation. Each of these main stages may have its own sub elements. Cibulka (1994 p. 111) provides a summary list of commentators who have been associated with this prescriptive and traditional approach. However, such models have their weaknesses in that they do not explain or, particularly in the case of LEAs, predict how the various stages of policy are interconnected. In this respect Ranson (1995b p. 441) has also indicated that how policy formulation is connected to implementation is a matter of definition rather than an empirical question. He also suggests that it would be possible to abstract 'moments' of policy through analysis and to determine whether there were links and the type of these links between policy generation, formulation, implementation and evaluation through empirical testing. In this respect my analysis has sought to take into account fluidity in the policy process and to recognise that policy evolves, in itself presupposing that various elements of the process are linked.

Dale (1992 p. 393) has indicated that there are significant difficulties in making a distinction between those who formulate and adopt policy and those who implement it. For instance it could be said that chief education officers who are often tasked with implementing policy, identify solutions to the shortcomings in the policy and resolve discrepancies in objectives at the policy inception stage with central government. Thus policy making and policy implementation can be likened to overlapping steps where ideas are adapted, contested and resisted (Penney and Evans 1994 p. 36).

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<sup>1</sup> With increased autonomy of schools and the consequent changes in the responsibilities of LEAs it is not so appropriate to suggest that all chains pass through LEAs.

It is also possible to think of the policy process in terms of a multiple perspective approach which takes into account the competing values in our political life e.g. equality, choice, and efficiency. However these values do not explain causal relationships among the features of the policy process.

Game theory (Long 1958 cited in Firestone 1989 p. 18) is one metaphor for thinking about the policy process and is based on a mathematical treatment of how individuals will act in situations where there is conflict or disagreement to achieve their intentions. The ecology-of-games metaphor (Firestone 1989 p. 18) has sought to reconcile the two images of rationality taking place at the collective level and the radical individualism of participants. As a result, a 'community or socially organised space houses a whole series of games' (Firestone 1989 p. 23) in which individuals compete in one of a few of the games that are available. None of the related games takes place in a timeframe that reflects the whole policy process. The metaphor proposes that winners are able to implement their objectives and are also able to keep their old positions or move on to more dominant or influential positions. The ecology-of-games metaphor is useful in that it highlights how each policy interacts with others and a variety of contextual factors. It also:

weans the analyst away from images of a single, omniscient, omnipotent "policy maker". It suggests that there is not someone out there who could make things better if he only wanted to, or if she "would only listen to me" (Firestone 1989 p. 23).

Other conceptions of the policy process include 'top down' and 'bottom up' models. In the former case, legislators specify goals in statutes and implementers introduce regulations to provide the parameters within which these goals should be achieved. There is evidence to support the view that policy making at the top is characterised by multiple agendas and ambiguities which create flexibility below for interpretation and manoeuvring (Trowler 1998 p. 80). In contrast the 'bottom up' view of policy process argues that 'street level bureaucrats' can adapt policies through a process of 'backward mapping' (Elmore 1982 cited in Cibulka 1994 p. 112). This latter concept can

lead to 'adaptive implementation' in which activities are adapted to be responsive to programme goals, with some changes to the goals as originally intended by the policy makers. These approaches can help to explain both how the policy process is played out within a LEA and the inherent tension between LEAs and central government in achieving co-ordinated and co-operative policy making – the concept of policy refraction as identified by Taylor *et al.* (1997 p. 119). Taken together 'top down' and 'bottom up' approaches are helpful but they do not account for the interconnectedness of the process. However, such two-way interactions have informed the concept of the 'policy cycle' (Bowe *et al.* 1992 p. 20) within critical theory.

Critical theory brings a number of advantages to the analysis of the policy process. It is this area which is particularly relevant to my research providing as it does a framework to examine the organisational variables such as micropolitics rather than the broader policy context. This theoretical framework does not make a clear distinction between political and social life and emphasises the covert uses of power through socialisation and the use of language (Cibulka 1994 p. 116). These approaches tend to emphasise equality and social justice and put more emphasis on policy antecedents e.g. unfair access to information, or the link between policy outcomes and inequitable social outcomes. Cibulka (1994 p. 116), however, indicates that there is some tendency to minimise the importance of values such as efficiency and choice; in addition there is some debate about the relative importance of policy processes in shaping policy outcomes and life chances.

The focus of critical theory is more on the policy processes and behavioural aspects of how policy outcomes occur. One of the key advantages of this overall approach is that it focuses openly on power arrangements in agenda setting, the way in which interests are set in motion, how access to decision-makers and negotiations are influenced by power, and how power arrangements influence the policy settlement. McLaughlin (1987 p. 175) has indicated that policy processes are inherently political as there are competing interests which involve compromises, trade-offs and settlements. In this respect, the new policy models such as new institutionalism, which start with

the individual as the basic unit to explain and predict actions and outcomes, are not helpful in explaining how power can operate cumulatively (Cibulka 1996 p. 105).

Ball (1990b) using ethnographic methods and analysis, has emphasised the messiness and complexity of modern education policy making. Policy making is 'often unscientific and irrational, whatever the claims of the policy makers are to the contrary' (Ball 1990b p. 3). His theoretical and conceptual analysis has been described as 'eclectic and pragmatic' (Bowe *et al.* 1992 p. 2). Kogan (1975) has also emphasised the untidiness of the policy system describing it: 'pluralistic, incremental, unsystematic, reactive' (p. 238) where power is distributed unevenly. Ball's theory includes 'agency the ideological category of the individual' (Bowe *et al.* 1992 p. 9). Ball's approach is structural and overarching and explores the policy process from economic, political and ideological perspectives, seeking to examine each level as well as the interrelationships between them. Taylor *et al.* (1997 p. 45) use a similar structure focusing on elements of context, text and consequence.

The development by Ball of the policy cycle<sup>2</sup> provides a framework for understanding the 'mediation of policy' (Taylor *et al.* 1997 p. 30). In all, Ball has identified five contexts: influence, policy text and production, practice, outcomes and political strategy. These contexts were conceived of as loosely coupled with a recognition that at each stage of the policy cycle they were influenced by complex factors and ad hocery. In making a distinction between policy as text and discourse, Ball addresses some of the criticisms of some 'bottom up' studies summarised by Marsh and Rhodes (1992 cited in Trowler 1998 p. 80). The advantage of Ball's overall framework for my research is that it is in the spaces and ambiguities in the policy process where micropolitics may be evident 'to recontextualise' (Ranson 1995b p. 436) the meaning, implementation and practice of policy. Because the policy process is open to renegotiation, there is an element of instability about it (Ozga 2000 p. 10). My research is based on the recognition that the policy

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<sup>2</sup> Ball's theoretical framework was clarified first in Bowe *et al.* (1992) and later in Ball (1994a)

process is incomplete, complex and not linear (Ball 1990b p. 9; Dale 1992 p. 394; Fitz *et al.* 1994 p. 65; Raab 1994a p. 7). In particular I have been influenced by Ball's neo-pluralism which has sought to record the:

messy realities of influence, pressure, dogma, expediency, compromise, intransigency, resistance, error, opposition and pragmatism in the policy process (Bowe *et al.* 1992 p. 9).

Ball concluded that these factors were as influential in the policy process as the influence of the state.

Of particular relevance also to my research is Ball's view that the power of the state is limited by the struggle to influence interpretation and action at each stage of the policy cycle. A 'state control model' of education policy with its top-down linearity could not be read off from education policy analysis. Ball's approach also provides an opportunity to consider matters which relate to justice, equality and individual freedom. Overall Ball has been concerned to emphasise that:

Policy is both text and action, words and deeds, it is what is enacted as well as what is intended. Policies are always incomplete insofar as they relate to or map on to the "wild profusion" of local practice (Ball 1994a p. 10).

At this point it is important to note that there have been criticisms of Ball's policy analysis amongst those who give precedence to the involvement of the state. Hatcher and Troyna (1994 p. 162), for instance while accepting that institutions reinterpret the text of policy, question whether the power of the state to control outcomes is as limited as Ball proposed. Their conclusions indicated that the state had significant control (1994 p. 158ff.) and the aim of policy analysis was to identify the levels of influence in the world; it was not sufficient only to assert as Ball had done that the world was complex. Hatcher and Troyna take a more state centred approach, indicating that through analysis of the policy process, the degrees of influence of the respective factors should be differentiated within the totality of the factors which interrelate (1994 p. 166). However, state policy is not launched in a vacuum for the state itself is subject to a set of limitations (cf. Gewirtz and Ozga 1990 p. 40).

Hatcher and Troyna (1994 p. 163) have also proposed that although policies, like texts, cannot be controlled at the level of discourse, they can be regulated at the operational level of practice. Drawing upon Dale's (1992) work and emphasising methodological issues, Hatcher and Troyna (1994 p. 156) suggest that it would not be appropriate to separate the functions of policy formulation and implementation. They agree with Dale that 'a focus on the state is not only necessary, but the most important component of any adequate understanding of education policy' (1992 p. 388). Finally in this context, Ranson (1995b p. 439) has indicated that the two different interpretations by Ball and Hatcher and Troyna of Althusser's work provide the basis for the two different theoretical positions.

### *Interpretation of texts*

Ranson (1995b p. 437) has indicated that the work of Barthes on 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts has provided Ball with a theoretical framework to explore how the context of practice is open to interpretation and reformation. Interestingly Henry (1993) and Ozga (2000 p. 94) believe that both text and discourse operate in relation to one another and therefore need not be conceptualised differently.

I am taking the view in my research, which is in accord with Scott (1994 pp. 42-47), that the interpretation of texts can be influenced by the interplay of both structure and agency at different times and at different places. Further I would support Scott's (1994 pp. 42f) conclusions, that even though 'official' texts such as central government Regulations and Circulars<sup>3</sup>, which are designed to change administrative procedures, may be readerly, they are not unidimensional and the position of the reader should not be excluded from the analysis. I would also suggest that it would not be in the interests of central government, even if it were possible, to produce totally prescriptive texts.

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<sup>3</sup> It is not necessary to restrict the description 'writerly' 'to those texts that come with "policy text" stamped all over them' (Ozga 2000 p. 95).

Once the important and formal work of defining policy has been completed by central government, many of the details of implementation are left to local government, in which I would include the formal and informal involvement of bureaucrats and practitioners from within the education service (cf. Levin 2001 p. 154). In the context of my research, the content of Government Regulations and Circulars is quite specific and provides an overall framework in which LEAs are expected to develop their Plans. However, LEAs have been allowed some freedom to decide on the detailed content of these Plans. In the light of these comments, therefore, I will be exploring whether the actions of Elected Members and officers not only influence the interpretation of a policy text but also shape agendas. It should also be remembered that from 1998 LEAs were already beginning to develop a tighter and more restricted policy focus with an emphasis on strategic planning which has been a feature of the modernising agenda for local government (Local Government Act 2000).

### *Globalisation*

It is also possible to discern broad trends across the range of national policies. The details of these policies have been 'mediated differently by the traditions of different nation states and different political parties' (Whitty *et al.* 1998 p. 39). There are also differences in practice, for this occurs in concrete and particular settings (cf. Lawton 1992 p. 135; Halpin and Troyna 1995 pp. 307-8; Whitty 1997 p. 5). Thus Ball is of the view that all governments have to respond to free market globalisation and:

that in a sense Labour's policies are not specific to Labour at all; they are local manifestations of global policy paradigms (1999 p. 195).

In the context of globalisation, or 'action at distance' (Giddens 1994a pp. 4f), it is possible, therefore, that a set of ideas developed in one country will be utilised in another country – the concept of 'policy borrowing' (Whitty *et al.* 1998 p. 40). How this takes place and the consequences of the mobility of ideas is still largely unexplored, however, it is apparent that the speed at which ideas migrate has increased (Bates 2002 p. 141).

### *Aspects of the macro and micro debate*

There continues to be a lively debate about the relative importance of the macro and micro explanations of the policy process. Ozga (1987) has summarised and highlighted the main points of this debate. Each framework has its own theoretical and methodological approach and its own preconceptions. The macro debate tends to be more concerned with abstract theorising and has set education within the context of the state, class and economy.

In contrast, those involved with micro studies provide insights into understanding the context of policy change. Ozga is somewhat critical of their approach which can be 'cavalier, uncritical [with an] eclectic attitude to theory' (1987 p. 139). Case study methodology tends to predominate 'but lacking in self-consciousness or open discussion about selection of material, representativeness, etc.' (Ozga 1987 p. 139).

In my Introduction I noted that the diverse institutions which comprise the modern democratic state, within which I included LEAs, are not necessarily unitary and rational pursuing clearly defined single strategies (Halford 1992 p. 183). Indeed Pringle and Watson (1990 cited in Witz and Savage 1992) go even further by indicating that the state is not a structure or an institution, nor an actor or an object but rather 'a site of a number of discursive formations' (p. 38). From their perspective they indicate that the state is not coherent, nor contradictory but erratic and disconnected. On such an analysis it would be difficult to identify power solely with the state and for the citizens of the state to be subordinated, as Marxists would suggest. State policies and actions, therefore, are 'not simply a reflex response to the functional needs of a system' (Franzway *et al.* 1988 p. 35) but rather may be seen as the outcome of specific social struggles.

Giddens (1984 pp. 24ff.) has sought to reconcile the roles played by structure and agency to emphasise that human beings are neither at the mercy of structural forces beyond their control nor do they have total freedom



unfettered by the 'rules and resources' of society – this is a matter to which I will refer in my definition of micropolitics. Archer (1982 p. 458) has adopted a similar approach without tying structure and agency so closely together.

Ozga (1987 p. 141) has identified 'middle level' analyses which could bridge the macro-micro gap and which can involve micro level techniques. Taking up the proposals of Hargreaves (1985) in seeking to close the micro-macro gap, Ozga examines an approach based on interview techniques to explore how personality and personal relations can influence policy outcomes. However, those undertaking this approach would need to be wary of not becoming too engrossed in the account itself. The aim would be to explore the complexities and the contradictions in the policy process and could provide a counter to the view of an over-determined structure set out in macro approaches. Reay (1998 p. 179) also considers that the meso level could be regarded as a key conceptual bridge between structure and agency.

It is within this discussion of the policy process that I wish to locate my study of micropolitics.

### **Micropolitics**

It was during the last two decades of the twentieth century that much of the key research was conducted into micropolitics. At this time there was a particular interest in theories of society that emphasised structural conflict, domination and emancipation, and the involvement of human agency in various aspects of the exercise of power (Marshall and Anderson 1994 p. 169). There was also a focus on the many subtle ways that power was exercised in the public sphere to stifle democracy. Many of the key references relate to the defining work on micropolitics undertaken mainly in schools in a period of about fifteen years from 1980. Recently a significant part of the conceptual framework has been applied and translated into other organisations such as universities e.g. Morley (1999). I have used both sets of research findings and have sought to review more recent literature in relation to the policy process and LEAs.

I have reflected on a definition of micropolitics which would be sufficiently general and at the same time would be in accord with the detail of my research data. The criteria which have underpinned my definition of micropolitics include a recognition that the policy process is messy and complex and is often unscientific and irrational (Firestone 1989 p. 23; Ball 1990b p. 9), as well as an acknowledgement that what 'individuals and groups actually do and say [are set] in the arenas of influence in which they move' (Ball 1990b p. 9).

My definition also seeks to acknowledge that over and above the complexity of human interaction there are structural influences both within a LEA, in particular, and in the state, in general. Although it is not the main purpose of my research to explore in detail the interrelationship of structure and agency I acknowledge that it is the structures and processes that provide the constraints and opportunities for human agency in micropolitics. As a consequence, the participants in the policy process in the LEA often mediated the external influences on decision-making, succinctly summarised in the statement, 'micropolitics mediates macropolitical will' (Morrison 1998 p. 15). The structural conditions found in the LEA and the practices of the participants in the preparation of the Plans have been inseparable, for 'just as organised structures make people so do people make organised structures' (Ramsay and Parker 1992 p. 258). This is a matter to which I wish briefly to return later in this chapter when I consider some literature on organisations. The analysis of the data which is included in Chapters 4 and 5 also seeks to explore these factors in a balanced way.

Following the comprehensive review of the literature by Blase (1991) and the conclusions drawn by Hoyle (1986), I have prepared the following working definition of micropolitics which is applicable to the production of the LEA's strategic Plans. This definition has arisen through an iterative process as I have worked with the literature and my data.

### *Micropolitics: a working definition*

*Micropolitics can involve both co-operative as well as discordant actions and processes as participants contribute to the preparation of strategic Plans within a LEA. Micropolitics can be differentiated from management procedures and general human interaction, which are on a continuum, because at the centre of micropolitics is the motivation to achieve political interest through influence – some of which may be negative and some benign. Power is a particularly significant element of micropolitics and individuals and groups may use it intentionally and unintentionally to achieve their goals. Power as a subset of micropolitics may be exercised in everyday social relations as well as through discourse involving knowledge and language. The exercise of power need not necessarily result in a group or an individual being permanently controlled by another individual or group as participants in the policy process are rarely completely without power.*

*Micropolitical activity may be discernible through observation of conflict, through nondecision-making and through the restrictions placed on the issues that can be discussed in meetings. The actions of participants may arise in the main from perceived differences between individuals and groups both within and outside the LEA. Elites may use micropolitical activity to influence and/or protect their interests and the resulting political action may comprise an almost separate organisational world of manipulation. Such actions can be both consciously or unconsciously motivated and they may be politically important in a particular situation. Macro- and micropolitical factors frequently interact, especially as the former provides the constraints and opportunities for the participants to engage with each other.*

The components of my definition indicate that:

micropolitics are more concerned with interests rather than goals, influence rather than authority, coalitions [and]... groups rather than the whole institution, and strategies rather than procedures (Hoyle 1986 p. 128).

### *Rationale for using the framework of micropolitics*

There is still much interest in how the public sector, not least LEAs, might enhance the effectiveness of its management through rational and technicist approaches, particularly by drawing lessons from business and commerce and attempts to steer practice more firmly through linking strategic statements and performance outcome measures (e.g. Fergusson 1994; Clarke and Newman 1997; DfEE 1997b; Audit Commission 2001; DTLR 2001; Levin 2001). This approach from the rational-technical perspective owes much to Weber (1968) and has continued through the policy framework for education of New Labour, the shift towards the 'regulation of quality' (Morley and Rassool 2000 p. 170), with the maintenance of the technicist new institutional culture of 'new public management' and 'corporate managerialism' (Gewirtz and Ball 1996 p. 4; Power 1994 p. 15). From the technicist-rational approach, Ogawa and Bossert (1997 p. 11) have indicated that organisations are seen to exist to achieve specific, predetermined goals and their activities are derived from this aim. Consequently there has been little or no discussion of the informal dynamics which exist and without which it is difficult to understand the operation of bureaucratic organisations. Thus in their approaches to the policy process many senior LEA officers are expected to demonstrate a technicist approach associated with new managerialism which has been founded on a rationalist epistemology of change (Ball 1990a p. 157). Such approaches are expected of them by external audit bodies e.g. the Audit Commission through the comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) introduced in 2002. Power is seemingly located with clients, customers, the community and competing organisations. In this respect Greenfield (1986) has warned of the dangers of:

linking science with positivism and depicted it as a computer-driven limiting reality to the quantifiable and calculable, and

spawning dehumanised and technologised administrators (pp. 61-2).

Hoyle (1986) has identified two main disadvantages to the rational-technicist perspective and proceeded to explain how micropolitics can address these. First there were too many variables to achieve a fully rational co-ordination of activities in organisations. Second, there were logical limits to rationality which 'arise because individual rationality can engender collective irrationality' (1986 p. 70). Further, Ball is of the view that:

decision-making is not an abstract rational process which can be plotted on an organisational chart; it is a political process, it is the stuff of micropolitical activity (1987 p. 26).

These conclusions are complemented by studies that include some examination of the policy process at the macro-level (e.g. Salter and Tapper 1981; McPherson and Raab 1988; Gewirtz and Ozga 1990; Lawton 1986; Ball 1990b; 1994b; Ozga 1987; Seldon 1988; Fitz and Halpin 1994; Whitty and Edwards 1994). These have demonstrated the importance of relating 'individual identity and the micro-political personal relationships to a wider analysis of power' (McPherson and Raab 1988 p. xii). In this respect the framework provided by cultural studies suggests that human agency must be taken seriously. Further Blase (1998) for instance has argued that:

organisational power and politics are important dimensions of many organisational processes and structures and frequently constitute the central mechanism, the "drive train" as it were, and account for significant organisational outcomes and phenomena (cited in Blase and Blase 2002 p. 10).

The framework for this research provided by micropolitics has enabled me at a LEA level to take account of the complexity of human interaction, conflict and the exercise of power which rational models of organisations do not permit (Blase and Anderson 1995 p. 1). Further the framework also addresses some of the inadequacies of both the social and psychological explanations of the dynamics of organisations.

### *Issues arising from using micropolitics as the framework for my research*

I recognise that my definition is broad based and inclusive, having similarities to some previous definitions provided by Blase (1991) and Hoyle (1986), and as such it will not be without its critics. In view of the breadth of previous analyses, Malen (1995) has indicated that the 'conceptual boundaries and distinctive features [of micropolitics] await definition' (p. 159). Hoyle (1999) has also questioned whether there is a discrete set of social processes that can be referred to as micropolitics. Further, Mawhinney (1999) has indicated: 'much that is now defined as specifically 'micropolitical' is hardly distinguishable as uniquely "political" human interaction' (p. 169). In this respect I have also noted that Grace (1989) has criticised the methodological approaches of liberal pluralism because they result in indeterminate conclusions, for instance:

Macpherson and Raab do *not* relate the "micropolitics of personal relationships to a wider analysis of power" which is their stated intention, because the wider analysis of power is largely absent (p. 92).

Morley (1999 p. 4) has indicated that power can operate everywhere in day to day activities and can be all pervasive in inter- and intrapersonal relations. I am not suggesting, however, that all micropolitical activity has a political motive and that all human interaction has political consequences, whether these were intended or not. I have also been wary both of the dangers and the naivety of reading into events interpretations which were not there.

I will seek to address Ozga's (1990) concerns that a theoretical framework for the policy process will not be forthcoming if there is a focus only on case studies:

we shall continue to dismantle and describe all the parts of the machine without being able to explain either how it works or what it is for (p. 361).

In the following sections, therefore, I wish to examine some of these matters suggesting that the conceptual boundaries have to be drawn widely in order to encompass the complexity of the human dimension in the policy process. Although I propose to discuss these as discrete areas, it will be apparent that

they are interrelated and as key aspects of this research they have informed the eclectic approach, which I have pursued with purpose and thought.

### **Discourse analysis**

With the emphasis on policy as process, policy can be seen as a 'struggle between contenders of competing objectives, where language – or more specifically discourse – is used tactically' (Fulcher 1989 p. 7). Discourse analysis builds on the view of commentators such as Edelman (1964 cited in Sroufe 1994 p. 87; 1988 cited in Levin 2001 p. 25) about the symbolic features of politics and the importance of defining the basic ways in which people think about issues. Ball (1990b) writes that:

Discourses are...about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority. Discourses embody meaning and social relationships, they constitute both subjectivity and power relations...Meanings thus arise not from language but from institutional practices, from power relations, from social position (pp. 17-18).

Thus discourse does not just represent reality, but helps to create it (Ball 1994a p. 21); therefore, from this perspective policy making is seen as an arena of struggle over meaning. Accepting the concept of policy as discourse provides a reminder of the importance of structural factors and that local participants in the policy process do not have unfettered power. It is within the milieu of context and agency for action that policy is defined and refined. Ball (1998) summarises it as follows:

Most policies are ramshackle, compromise, hit and miss affairs, that are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through complex process of influence, text production, dissemination and, ultimately, re-creation in contexts or practice (p. 126).

These insights are consistent with the conclusions of Penney and Evans (1994 p. 39) that the policy agendas of central government have largely been absorbed into the discourse of schools and LEAs.

## Power

In my working definition I have mentioned that the exercise of power and influence is a key feature of micropolitics. Although the concept of power has been the subject of much investigation, I wish to highlight some insights from these debates which are relevant to my research. The roots of power and its associated terms authority, influence and control, are in themselves contested. The following sections provide some background as to how power can be theorised and indicate that power and influence are fluid, multidirectional and their scope is often ambiguous (Bacharach and Lawler 1980 cited in Hoyle 1986 p. 73). The different aspects of power are often referred to the faces of power and it is each of these I wish to explore.

### *'First face of power'*

Some of the most celebrated studies examining power within local politics are from the 1950s and 1960s. Hunter (1953) used a reputational approach in his study of Atlanta. He argued from his research that power was concentrated in the hands of a socio-economic elite. In looking at the control of resource allocation in urban systems, Pahl (1975) maintained that the key power players were bureaucrats, local politicians and other elites.

In contrast an issue-oriented approach focusing on observable behaviour was undertaken by Dahl (1961). From his analysis of New Haven in Connecticut, he concluded that power was distributed amongst different interest groups which were active on different issues, and that coalitions of groups could be fluid. Dahl also concluded that each group had some influence on decision-making, and although no one group was dominant, any group with sufficient determination could ensure its wishes were adopted. Dahl acknowledged that an elite might be able to control opinion: 'leaders do not merely respond to the preferences of constituents; leaders also shape preferences' (Dahl 1961 p. 164). Polsby (1963) developed these concepts into the theoretical framework of pluralism – in such a political system power was fragmented and diffused. Cawson and Saunders (1981 cited in Ham



and Hill 1993 p. 23) have suggested that pluralistic politics have developed because local agencies of the state have become responsible for services and have been subject to different political influences at local level.

Wolman and Goldsmith (1992) have suggested that the elitist-pluralist debate could be summarised as 'localist approaches' as they sought to explain city and local politics. Both the elitists and the pluralists have indicated that local elites fulfil a key role in determining public policy, and 'both could be linked to the kind of normative approach which stresses the value of autonomous, local decision-making' (p. 13). These approaches have also concluded that a relatively small number of people have exercised local power. These groups might be a socio-economic elite, as proposed by the elitists, or a series of elites with different resource bases, as proposed by the pluralists. Such insights are particularly pertinent to my study in relation to the role of Elected Members and officers.

Increasingly most local governments have allowed access in some form to various groups and individuals who might wish to influence the decision-making process. Within a LEA there could be at least three dimensions to these interest groups. First there are those groups of people who may be outside the LEA, who wish to promote and implement their own policies. Examples of these groups would be voluntary groups or the parents of children in special schools. These groups become part of the micropolitical process according to the strategies that they use to advocate their ideas:

Interests are pursued by individuals but frequently they are most effectively pursued in collaboration with others who share a common concern (Hoyle 1986 p. 89).

These groups may also be long lasting or they may be loose associations of individuals who are united by specific common interests. Second, I would suggest that headteachers and governors could comprise a separate type of interest group in view of the breadth of their roles and the formal arrangements which they have to influence a LEA. Third, there may be interest groups with specific views within a LEA. Although they may be employees who are not at the centre of the decision-making process,

nevertheless, they may still be able to exercise significant influence on their managers<sup>4</sup> because of the cohesion arising from their shared values and beliefs. Some of these LEA employees might feel they have an element of professional autonomy e.g. educational psychologists, which enable them to be part of the 'enthusiastic vanguard' for change (Hampel 1995 cited in Blase and Blase 2002 p. 24). Both Elected Members and senior officers have to decide how they wish to respond to the views expressed by these and other groups.

Means of access can be used to protect the powerful groups, with the consequence that the relatively powerless groups can be disadvantaged. Stoker (1988 cited in Wolman and Goldsmith 1992 p. 167) for instance has explored the access that groups have to decision-makers at local level and has concluded that selected groups have privileged access and can exert undue influence over decision-making in British cities.

The increasing number of special agencies at a local level – 'the non-elected local government sector' (Wolman and Goldsmith 1992 p. 168) – can lead to a mobilisation in bias (Schattsneider 1960 cited in Wolman and Goldsmith 1992 p. 168) at local level. This can result in certain interests and groups such as those with the relevant skills having preferential access to local decision-makers. As a consequence other groups – the unhelpful<sup>5</sup> or less well established<sup>6</sup> (Wolman and Goldsmith 1992 p. 168) – find it more difficult to promote or safeguard their interests and to ensure their access to local decision-makers. Vincent has identified that restrictions to access reinforce the position of powerful groups and the difficulties of parental groups in forming an identity and a stable membership (Vincent 2000 p. 134).

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<sup>4</sup> The staff who have influenced their managers may have been appointed in part because they held a range of views which were consistent with the views of the dominant interest group.

<sup>5</sup> The objectors to a particular course of action.

<sup>6</sup> Groups which may not have been in existence for any length of time or who are still in the process of refining their views.

### *'Second face of power'*

The pluralist framework has been questioned by Bachrach and Baratz (1970) who have argued that power may be used by certain persons and groups to control the political agenda and restrict discussion to safe issues – this is sometimes referred to as the 'second face of power'. One of the implications of Bachrach and Baratz's work, the neo-elitist critique, was that the distribution of power could be seen as less pluralistic than Dahl concluded with the result that those who benefited, a minority or elite group, were able to defend and promote their vested interests. This second face of power identified by Bachrach and Baratz operated more through nondecision-making of 'important' or 'key' issues, or suppressing conflicts and preventing them from entering the political process for instance through agenda setting (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; 1970). These are key themes which I wish to explore through my data analysis. It is important to differentiate nondecision-making from the negative features of decision-making such as deciding not to act or deciding not to decide. Nondecision-making is also an aspect of systems theory (Easton 1965) with gatekeepers helping to control the flow of issues into the political arena in order to safeguard the stability of political systems. Bachrach and Baratz (1970), however, have provided a different emphasis by indicating that vested interests are safeguarded by nondecision-making. Despite the significant differences with the pluralists, Bachrach and Baratz's analysis is similar in that it was based on actual, observable conflict, overt or covert.

### *'Third face of power'*

Lukes (1974) has taken forward the debate by promoting a third, invisible and 'radical' dimension of power, focusing on whose interests were being served through the exercise of power. He indicated that the two dimensional view of power as conceptualised, only showed up in the case of actual conflict. This ignored the critical point that the most effective 'use of power is to prevent such conflict arising in the first place' (Lukes 1974 p. 23). Such power relations influenced aspirations and defined interests so that the individuals

influenced by them might not be aware and could not see or imagine any alternatives.

Lukes also indicated that there were various ways in which potential issues were kept out of politics and these included the operation of social forces, institutional practices and individuals' decisions. These were not necessarily identified in observable conflict as this may have been averted – referred to as 'latent conflict' (Lukes 1974 p. 24). Lukes' article provides a framework to consider and to focus on whose interests were being served as conflict was being averted. As the preparation of the statutory Plans within a LEA has been based on debate and discussion, the question that Lukes raised about whether rational persuasion was a form of power has been of particular interest.

#### *Composite statement for the three faces of power*

In Chapters 4 and 5 within the overall framework provided by micropolitics, I will seek to explore the evidence for the faces of power, using the process for the production of the Plans. In the Conclusion I will seek to provide an overarching statement as to how the respective features of power have been exercised in the LEA. Although each of the faces of power can provide a useful insight, a statement bringing them together can be particularly helpful; such a statement has been provided by Maguire (1992):

The first face of power is visible in direct action, where force or might are used, or in public decisions, taken on publicly discussed issues. The second face of power can be seen in attempts to stifle an issue as it emerges, or in attempts to redefine or reshape an issue into something less threatening. The third face of power is the hardest to discern. Power in this third dimension is used to manipulate people's perceptions so that they are unaware of having a grievance (p. 20).

This statement encapsulates how power might be exercised and the advantages of producing such a statement have been identified by Malen (1994 p. 160) who has indicated that the three faces taken together give a fuller understanding of political processes.

### *Benign power*

In the brief discussion of the three faces of power which I have undertaken it might be concluded that power always had negative features. It is important to note, therefore, that the work of McCalla (2002) provides a theoretical framework in which to examine the concept of benign power, which she sees as going beyond the more traditional framework of conflict and power outlined by Dahl (1961), Bachrach and Baratz (1963) and Lukes (1974). McCalla has viewed these studies as referring to negative or 'malign' power because its focus was on the pursuit of self interest at the expense of another – 'power over' (Clegg 1989). The more positive interpretations of human activity of Parsons (1967; 1968) and Arendt (1970) have also been examined. Parsons for instance has seen power as being able to achieve consensus and collective goals and could be considered as 'power to' (Clegg 1989). On the other hand Arendt has viewed negotiation, discussion and/or disagreement as rational argument which could be identified in collective action.

In contrast to Parsons and Arendt who have seen the common good achieved by a consensual power relationship, McCalla has argued that benign power could be said to be exercised in discordant relationships between people pursuing altruistic and/or collective ends and in which the social and political values of democracy, political freedom and social justice were paramount. McCalla has proposed that 'malign' and 'benign' power can co-exist in the same setting and in the same or different levels of organisations, a matter which I wish to explore in my data analysis. It is important to note that McCalla has concluded consensual power was at the most a partial reflection of reality and continues to be part of an abstract and theoretical framework only.

### *Micropolitical activity and the exercise of power in organisations*

My definition of micropolitics has at its centre the notion that discord can arise as the different interests and interest groups pursue their separate

objectives. There are, however, likely to be differences in goals and values between interest groups, because these groups may form alliances to advance policies which reflect their joint interests at particular times (Young 1997 cited in Vincent 2000 p. 32). The pluralists assume that interests are to be understood as policy preferences with the result that a conflict of interests equates to a conflict of preferences. However, pluralists do not accept that interests might be unarticulated or unobservable, and particularly that people might be mistaken about or unaware of their own interests (Lukes 1974 p. 14). Within a large LEA the opportunities for complex alliance building and the exercise of influence are extensive and in part have contributed to the complexity of my data analysis.

As micropolitics can be both overt and identifiable as well as subtle and complex, power may be used and structured into social relations so that it does not appear to be 'used' at all (Blase and Anderson 1995 p. 12). The way in which power may be exercised invisibly in organisations is one of the insights that has been contributed by cultural and feminist analyses of micropolitics (Marshall and Anderson 1994 p. 175). Such analyses have assisted me to consider the more covert ways in which power can be exercised, such as competition and domination. Feminist theory and cultural studies have been at the forefront of examining the connections between the public and the private spheres; both of these have influenced my methodology. I have already indicated that the models which accord with the rational-technical view of organisations have regarded the policy filtering process as capable of being improved by means of better implementation models. Alternatively, the insights arising from cultural studies have suggested that:

micropolitics at the local level involves complex forms of cultural and political resistance, accommodation and compliance grounded in the intentions of social actors (Marshall and Anderson 1994 p. 174).

In effect, the study of micropolitics could be said to be more about 'how power is exercised, rather than simply possessed' (Morley 1999 p. 73).

The literature associated with postmodernism also provides insights into the exercise of power. Although the term 'postmodernism' has been questioned, e.g. by Giddens (1991), the theoretical thinking associated with it has undermined older ideas of fixed structures conditioning behaviour and imposing regularity and predictability (Trowler 1998 p. 75). This theorising has proposed that knowledge and power are inextricably linked: 'postmodernism suggests that every form of knowledge is an effect of power' (McNay 1992 p. 137 cited in Morley 1999 p. 118). Thus power can be conceived as being exercised in the whole gamut of everyday social relations between people and within individuals, rather than in organisational structures and the status associated with individuals (Ball 1987 p. 245). I have noted with Walby (1990 cited in Morley 1999 p. 44) that the social context of power relations should be recognised because power operates as a network and each specific struggle has implications on the entire network of relations. As there is not a finite amount of power flowing between participants in particular social settings, meanings are negotiated by unequal participants in a variety of different organisational arrangements; indeed different projects or topics can empower actors differentially (Scott 1994 p. 46). As a result, power is treated as being exercised rather than possessed.

This brief analysis of the concept of power will be one of the building blocks for my data analysis and in particular it will also inform my discussion of micropolitical activity in the LEA. It is to the literature associated with LEAs that I now wish to turn in order to illuminate another aspect of the context in which my research is located.

### **Local Education Authorities – the context in which I exercise my professional role as an officer**

I have set micropolitical activity in the context of the policy process, I now wish to consider the context of local government in general and LEAs in particular, especially as the role and functions of LEAs and their current position in the polity is central to my research.

## *Local government*

Local authorities owe their *raison d'être* to statute; they have no independent right to exist (Hill 1994 cited in Ball *et al.* 1997 p. 149). The contested nature of local government can in part be explained through it being a component of the welfare state, which in itself has been subject to the complex interaction of social and economic factors (Cochrane 1993 cited in Ball *et al.* 1997 p. 149). There is also a lack of clarity as to the role of local government when compared to central government. In addition, in the light of discussions in the European Union on matters such as 'subsidiarity' (Bogdanor 1994 pp. 200-205), there seems to be no end in sight to the considerable political debate which has been running for the last twenty years about the future and purpose of local government. Therefore:

many of the issues before local authorities reflect...[a] ...search for a balance between organisational continuity and organisational change (Leach *et al.* 1994 p. 44).

As with much else in the public services in general and the education service in particular, there continues to be significant change which in turn is part of an evolutionary political process. Indeed the non-linearity of these and other changes and the way in which they are being managed are two features of my research.

In local government in England generally power is concentrated in the hands of the political parties which have a majority of Elected Members. The democratically elected council<sup>7</sup> and officers fulfil the role of the LEA. There is a high ratio of citizens to Elected Members; these Members, and 'County Hall', have often been seen as remote from the people they serve, a conclusion drawn by Radnor *et al.* (1996 p. 46). In essence the democratic structure is in the main representative democracy although there are signs of participatory democracy increasing with local communities taking a higher profile through local strategic partnerships and neighbourhood regeneration schemes. These developments in part illustrate the concept of the 'enabling'

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<sup>7</sup> From October 2001 the Cabinet of the local authority which is the subject of this research, has been the main decision-making body.



authority where communities are enabled to meet their own needs (Stewart 1995 cited in Ball *et al.* 1997 p. 161).

Local authorities are emphasising democratic involvement and accountability at local level to counter balance the market and the strong central state. Although a range of views has been put forward (Brighouse 1996; Cordingley and Harrington 1996; Pryke 1996) on how democratic accountability might be enhanced, it is not clear how these proposals would avoid some of the drawbacks of the current democratic arrangements whereby many sections of the population feel passive between elections, unrepresented or powerless (Ball *et al.* 1997 p. 148). Moreover, Radnor *et al.* (1996) have suggested that the legislative framework has led to 'the meaning and practice of democratic accountability [being] increasingly diverse, elusive and unclear' (p. 6). It is possible that the current modernising agenda for local government might in some way provide a framework for reform, although there is little evidence of this so far; I have already referred in the Introduction to a nascent 'New Localism' outlined by Corry and Stoker (2002).

#### *Role and functions of LEAs*

In one sense the role of local government has been becoming more narrow with the establishment of a new political order (Radnor *et al.* 1996 pp. 4-5) – what Ranson (1995b) has called 'the neo-liberal consumer democracy' (p. 427). This can be seen especially in relation to education services, with a growing tension between ensuring service delivery and providing policy leadership (Ball *et al.* 1997 p. 157):

A decade of ambivalence, challenge and reductionism has been followed by a change of Government [New Labour] bringing a new agenda and setting in hand a process of reformulation and classification (Whitbourn *et al.* 2000 p. 2).

Issues arising from these factors have been further compounded as within local government, new departments have been established or the whole council itself has taken over functions from the education department (Atkinson and Wilks-Heeg 2000 cited in Kogan 2002 p. 331), which has become less autonomous within the corporate structure.

The traditional role of Elected Members is at risk as indicated by the Chairman of the Local Government Association:

The belittling of the role of elected Councillors by government is not confined to local funding decisions. Their role in leading local communities and representing the interests of their constituents is also under concerted attack (Beecham 2000).

Similarly there are signs that LEA officers are being increasingly treated as if they were the 'branch managers' of central government (Whitbourn *et al.* 2000 p. 14).

Although there is increasing specialisation, the roles of officers are quite comprehensive. In order to fulfil their statutory functions, officers could be said to:

be power wielders with a conscience, who must know education laws, regulations, financial wizardry, [trade] union agreements, techniques in nurturing, chastising, negotiation and alchemistic larceny (Meyer 2001 p. 442 referring to US principals citing Morgan 1998).

Officers are not 'just' administrators; having been a teacher has in the past been a prerequisite for employment in order to fulfil some of these functions, although for some management positions e.g. planning school places or governor services, this is no longer the case. In the LEA a number of officer roles were designated as 'managers' which implied having a customer focus, flexibility, being outward looking and having a drive for efficiency rather than abstract 'professional standards' (Gewirtz 2002 p. 6). From my experience in the LEA, I would suggest that most senior officers saw themselves fulfilling a dual role: having a vision for the education service as well as effectively and efficiently managing individual services within the Council. This view is supported in part by Hodgkinson (1991 p. 53 cited in Ribbins and Gunter 2002) who takes administration to be leadership, and leadership to be administration.

The decreasing influence of LEAs and the increasing devolution of managerial and financial control to local levels and the consolidation of power within central government, has been documented, see for example, Taylor *et*

*al.* (1997); Whitty *et al.* (1998) and Levin (2001). It is also important to note that these factors can be viewed as global trends where local democratic control has been questioned. Although elected representatives are democratically accountable, they together with bureaucrats at the local level, have been left with responsibility but with declining power. It is salutary to reflect that the downgrading of the political and the emphasis on the professional at local level by central government was rehearsed some time ago by Alexander (1985 p. 68). In the context of my research, and as I have indicated in the Introduction, Elected Members have limited autonomy as central government has been setting the overall policy agenda for the education service whilst requiring LEAs to contextualise this by setting local objectives and targets. It has been concluded by Hunter *et al.* (2000) that even in this function local government's local knowledge is seen as 'apparently irrelevant in the pursuit of higher standards' (p. 4). Further, proposals to allow some freedoms and flexibilities to local authorities designated as 'excellent' as a result of the CPA process (DTLR 2001), do not extend as far as spending on schools; a sign perhaps that central government sees the Formula Spending Share<sup>8</sup> as *its* funding for schools.

The role of the LEA is complicated and varied, and includes a range of separate responsibilities:

The agenda of the Government has...been to reform the local governance of education by changing the relations of power, values and organisation between the individual and the system (Ranson 1995a p. 1).

Although Campbell (2000 pp. 94-7) has indicated that there has been a decade of revisionism nationally, several of the functions which LEAs fulfil are longstanding, whilst others relate to and focus on promoting and securing educational improvement in schools and other settings in a local area. Other roles have arisen as a result of national initiatives to renew local strategic and inclusive activity, in education and related areas. This has resulted in identifying resources for the areas of greatest need and has included giving attention to the cross-cutting agenda relating to social inclusion.

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<sup>8</sup> Replaced the Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) from 2003/04.

Interestingly, in a keynote speech Ms Morris, the then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, spoke enthusiastically about the role of a 'middle tier' between central government and schools. She indicated that as well as the statutory tasks allocated to councils there was more innovative and creative work required in the interpretation and delivery of central government initiatives (Morris 2002). In this context there has been increasing emphasis on how education along with other aspects of cultural, economic and social life can support the well being of an area and communities.

These activities require 'joined up working' in 'partnership' with other statutory agencies, and with the voluntary and the private sectors. It is difficult to do justice to these overworked terms; and as I have already suggested, the three-way partnership for education between central government, LEAs and schools has changed significantly over the past fifteen years:

Partnership is now much more diffuse, embracing the whole community and tying it into the project of improvement. Partnership is also very obviously unequal, as no amount of reference to the shared nature of the project can conceal the very strong tendency to control and direct it from the centre (Ozga 2000 p. 101).

Ball *et al.* (1997 p. 153) have indicated that most of these partnership arrangements have been directed towards schools rather than parents or the community in general. It is possible that there will be changes forthcoming from developments such as local strategic partnerships which have as their focus improved service delivery for the electorate. It should also be recalled that some local provision for education is within the jurisdiction of a developing 'middle tier' – the Learning and Skills Council and the Connexions Service to name but two – 'the new magistracy' (Stewart and Davis 1994 995 cited in Ball *et al.* 1997 p. 162) with their 'inherent gender, class and ethnic biases, and a new cadre of entrepreneurs and technocrats' (Ball *et al.* 1997 p. 162).

The statutory Plans which provide the context to my research are associated with the roles of LEAs which have been most recently emphasised. Indeed the preparation and implementation of these statutory and strategic Plans have been premised on the concept of partnership which involves sharing power and influence (McPherson and Raab 1988 p. 4) and not on a straightforward division of responsibilities. However, in many respects, this has remained an aspiration because the LEA has been the dominant contributor to partnership working (Whitty *et al.* 1998 p. 100) in relation to the production of these Plans.

In this same period of fifteen years, the Audit Commission's assessment of the purposes of LEAs has moved from *Losing an Empire, Finding a Role* (Audit Commission 1989) to a conclusion that the role of the LEA is necessary, although significantly different from the past:

As the 1990s progressed, the limitations of a school driven model of education without a clear and complementary LEA role became increasingly apparent (Audit Commission 1999 p. 7).

Even though it is possible to identify the legal basis of the functions and roles of the LEA there is 'profound ambiguity about what the LEA *is*, as well as problems over what it is for' (Whitbourn *et al.* 2000 p. 16). At the North of England Education Conference in January 2000, in Wigan, in response to a questioner who 'sensed a profound ambivalence on the part of the Government to LEAs', the Secretary of State issued what has become known as the 'Wigan challenge':

if education authorities did not exist ... We would invent them for the coming century. It seems to me that it is asking people to define their role. The challenge is not to whine about what has been done by central Government, but to get up and show what education authorities can do in that task ... in transforming the life chances of children, rather than turning the service in on itself (Blunkett 2000).

The challenge was restated in May 2000 by the Secretary of State at The Education Network's conference on 'What makes a good LEA?' Not long after the Audit Commission's (1998) discussion, the then DfEE, published

two documents (DfEE 1999<sup>9</sup>; 2000a) which took forward the debate. The LEA's role in school education was summarised as follows: special educational needs, access and school transport, school improvement and tackling failure, educating excluded pupils and pupil welfare, strategic management and local accountability. As has been indicated by Campbell (2000 p. 95), LEAs were to add value to schools by implementing Plans such as the EDP which were premised on raising pupil achievement, school improvement and social inclusion by challenging and intervening in schools in inverse proportion to success:

LEAs are the means through which external support and intervention can be applied in a way that is sensitive to each school's performance and circumstances (DfEE 1999 p. 4).

The four statutory Plans, therefore, which are the subject of my research are at the heart of the functions of the LEA and the government agenda for the education service and as such the process for preparing these Plans has gained added importance. A study of the way in which stakeholders have contributed to the development of these Plans, therefore, would have been significant in its own right; however, I believe this area of study has gained in importance as I have explored micropolitical activity during the production of these Plans.

In many respects central government<sup>10</sup> had been able to distance itself from the direct responsibility for unpopular decisions which might arise (Jeffs and Smith 1994 p. 24) as its intervention was disguised through the 'recruitment of intermediary agencies' (Shore and Roberts 1995 p. 12). Consequently, central government has been able to insulate itself from conflict and has been able to shift blame; all points noted by Weiler (1990 p. 440) and Bishop and Mulford (1999 p. 186). Because LEAs are locally elected and accountable they have fulfilled a constitutional and political 'buffer' role. Therefore, an essential part of the LEA's overall role is to manage the

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<sup>9</sup> The Code of Practice on LEA-School Relations was revised in 2001 (DfEE 2001a).

<sup>10</sup> I have previously drawn the distinction between 'central government' and the 'state'; I take the latter term to include both central and local government and other agencies implementing central government policies.

planning process for its locality and to relate this to the wider regional and national agendas, which are more extensive than just education (Audit Commission 1999 pp. 11, 41-3).

The planning process is underpinned by the OFSTED inspection criteria for LEAs, the Best Value regime<sup>11</sup>, and the most recent evaluation of local authorities through the CPA identified in the Local Government White Paper (DTLR 2001). Each of these processes is premised on the notion of market and political accountability. Thus the activities of LEAs and the overall delivery of services by councils are being assessed by means of continuous improvement, against the tests of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, with the intention of enhancing services generally and improving educational standards in particular (Audit Commission 1999). Although the White Paper (DTLR 2001) set out a package of deregulatory measures<sup>12</sup>, these will only apply if they are earned. However, I would expect central government to continue to control the levers of power such as determining the overall funding for local government, specific funding for the education service, setting overall policy and a high level of regulation – all evidence of the concepts of ‘performativity’ (Lyotard 1984 cited in Broadfoot 2001 p. 137), the ‘competitive state’ (Blackmore 1999 p. 38) and the ‘evaluative state’ (Neave 1988 pp. 8-10). Indeed my expectation has in part been confirmed by the recent DfES proposal to agree individual Compacts with LEAs setting out how they will work together on the priorities that matter most locally (LGA *et al.* 2003).

Neave (1988) has also argued that there has been a change in focus from a process model to an output model with the result that the state has stepped back:

from the murky plain of overwhelming detail, the better to take refuge in the clear and commanding heights of strategic “profiling” (p. 12).

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<sup>11</sup> This regime has been partially relaxed as a result of the introduction of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

<sup>12</sup> Currently included in the Local Government Bill proceeding through Parliament.

This 'remote steering' (Neave 1998 pp. 266, 269) or steering the education service from a distance (Marginson 1999 p. 25) has also been explored in some detail by Whitty *et al.* (1998) who conclude that 'the strong, evaluative, state is a minimalist one in many respects, but a more powerful and even authoritarian one in others' (p. 46).

There has been progressive removal of, and changes to the roles of the respective tiers of government or administration between the central state and individual institutions (e.g. Whitty *et al.* 1998 p. 30). In relation to this Radnor *et al.* (1996) have concluded that:

public service is intended to be replaced, as the dominant organising concept for educational provision, by competitive self-interest and entrepreneurship (p. 3).

In this respect, although it is not the main focus of my research it is important to note that the DfES has been encouraging LEAs and schools to adopt new models of working with the private sector to raise standards (Chitty 2002 p. 272); this is in addition to the private sector taking over the responsibilities of those LEAs which have been identified by OFSTED as failing.<sup>13</sup> This is one factor which has led Sharp (2002) to conclude that New Labour's approach to the role of LEAs is:

that they will never again be central government's only or even its senior partners at local level, but merely one of its many local partners in the development and improvement of the education system (p 209).

As LEAs have a range of core functions to fulfil, explored in some detail by Sharp (2002 pp. 206-13), and which I have already outlined, their future is clear for the timebeing, however, it may be as a kind of 'administrative unit for the gaps' (p. 209).

From this résumé, I would suggest that LEAs, or organisations below central government level providing leadership in the education service and to

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<sup>13</sup> The LEA in which my research has been centred has been part of a pilot scheme overseen by the DfES to explore new ways of working with the private sector to deliver it schools-related services. After a long and robust evaluation process the Cabinet decided in December 2002 that a partnership with the private sector should not proceed. Micropolitical activity was an influential factor in this outcome.



schools in particular, will continue to have a role, although their power will be conditional on those tiers of government above them. The future of the democratically elements of local government, however, are likely to be the subject of a continuing debate.

## **Organisations**

It is not my purpose to enter into a lengthy discussion about organisations in general and whether a LEA in particular could be classed as an organisation. I have noted that some commentators have argued that the concept of an organisation is at best fuzzy (e.g. Nadler 1993 p. 87) whilst others have suggested that the organised structures of organisations and the practices of actors within those organisations are inseparable (Ramsay and Parker 1992 p. 258). My view of the LEA as an organisation has been influenced by Greenfield's general conclusion that organisations are not organic or 'natural' entities, rather that: 'It is people who are responsible for organisations and people who change them' (Greenfield 1993b p. 152). This conceptual framework has not gone unchallenged and a useful summary of the objections can be found in Park (2001). A normal feature of organisational life is that they are 'disordered and conflict-ridden' (Greenfield 1993d p. 217), a point noted by Clegg (1989 p. 198), where 'people are busy with all kinds of activity directed at expressing themselves or at controlling others' (Greenfield 1993a p. 111). Of particular relevance to my research is Greenfield's view that conflict arises mainly as a result of the values that people hold, therefore, 'one or some people's values must and do win-out over others' (Greenfield 1993b p. 153). Consequently, in a society that recognises and values plurality, disagreement and contention among individuals and groups will exist. It is not surprising, therefore, that as educational settings are part of general society there are likely to be expressions of 'individual wilfulness' (Greenfield 1984 p. 166); as such these expressions will often be demonstrated in micropolitical activity.

Order and direction in organisations including LEAs, have to be managed by people where there are potentially diverse and conflicting interests (Morgan

1986 p. 142 cited in Malen 1994 p. 147). Power and influence can be demonstrated through the competing claims of various groups within and outside organisations and are fundamental to the shaping and reshaping of politics. The micropolitical framework has provided an important dimension to help to distinguish 'rhetoric from reality' (Glatter 1982 p. 16), focusing on the different objectives of groups and individuals in the LEA and how they set about achieving these objectives.

## **Conclusion**

The literature has created a perspective and provided insights into how the policy process continues to be contested, in particular the various observations that have arisen through the macro-micro debate. The literature has been a key influence on the shape and structure of this research. I have sought to take account of central government providing the policy context, whilst recognising that local government could be regarded as a constituent of the state. The literature on micropolitics has provided a framework to explore how within a LEA, individuals, interest groups and coalitions have their own purposes and can modify and refine central government policy. The literature suggests that ambiguity and instability influence decisions, which in turn arise through a complex process of negotiation and bargaining. Insights are, therefore, provided into everyday occurrences, bringing into sharp relief the actions of people and their purposes, particularly where the functions of LEAs are under scrutiny. Much of this activity is influenced by both structure and agency and can take place in informal settings and is neither 'top down' nor 'bottom up'. This complexity in the preparation of the four Plans is in contrast to the more formal models of organisations which indicate that decisions are arrived at after a rational process which may be either 'top down' or 'bottom up'.

The overall conceptual framework provided by micropolitical activity has been complemented by Greenfield's view of the role of the individual in organisations. The insights arising from the three faces of power have provided the tools to explore the interrelationship of Elected Members and

officers and their relationships with a wide range of stakeholders. Overall this analysis of the literature has indicated that the policy process in a LEA can be ambiguous, unstable and contested, rather than solely rational and technical.

## **CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I will be seeking to reflect on the overall research process. Although there is a specific section on the ethical dimensions associated with my research these dimensions are a thread running through the whole of this chapter. The following areas are covered:

- i) research approach;
- ii) research design;
- iii) systematic collection of the data;
- iv) ethical dimensions;
- v) analysing the data;
- vi) validity;
- vii) reflexivity, including how my roles as education officer and as researcher have become inextricably linked.

### **Overall approach to the research**

I have already indicated in Chapter 2 that my epistemology owes much to Greenfield (1979 cited in Milley 2002) who argued that research in educational administration is inherently 'interested', that is:

In its choice of questions, conceptual frames and methods, let alone the conclusions it derives, research explicitly or tacitly expresses a normative vision of what it means to be human and to live in society and organisation (Milley 2002 p. 48).

By revealing and interpreting the meanings of participants I have sought in particular to explore the way micropolitical activity in the LEA could refine the policies of central government. Through the interpretive process I have been able to some extent to break free from the everyday ideas which formed and constrained my previous experience with the result that I have learnt more about my professional role and the context within which I work.

## **Research design – the analytical framework**

The design of this research was informed by the complex combination of theoretical and methodological factors and the more mundane but nevertheless important matter of the amount of time that I could devote to the project.

I have already indicated that an examination of the policy process in a LEA has been complex and could not be explored using one theoretical framework. I have not sought to use meta narrative but rather I have advocated theoretical pluralism and would hold with Hoy (1996) that:

Theoretical perspectives in educational administration need to be open, fluid and pluralistic if they are to be useful (p. 370).

Approaching the research question from more than one perspective has provided results which are more rounded and comprehensive than would have arisen from using a single approach. Alford (1975 cited in Ham and Hill 1993) has noted the difficulty with single bodies of theory or single paradigms that:

Each paradigm has a tendency to claim more explanatory power than it possesses and to extend the domain of its concepts to answer those questions it is actually unable to deal with (p. 152).

In my view useful analytical tools from different theoretical positions should not be discarded because they do not accord with an overall established theoretical framework. My eclecticism, therefore, has at its centre a concern to identify insights from a range of relevant sources and to bring them together into a new synthesis to take into account the complexity of my project:

We need to be subtle and complex in diverse ways if we want to comprehend significant differences in organisational life. But we also need to match this differentiation with the integration that comes when we articulate connections, themes, and patterns that tie those differences into coherent, memorable guidelines (Griffiths 1997 p. 374).

There are disadvantages to this eclectic approach as it could be prone to subjectivity and opportunism. I have noted Ozga's (2000) caution in that it is

tempting to assume that the broader one's repertoire the more one can explain (p. 50). I have also sought to avoid the pitfalls of theoretical eclecticism which Halpin (1994) has identified based on Henry's comments (1993), in which the final result can look:

more like an accumulation of interesting insights, albeit cleverly integrated, than a thorough going theorism of why education policy takes the form it does at particular times, and why its impact is more likely to have certain effects than others (p. 199).

The analysis of micropolitics within the policy process has been highly complex precisely because it has focused on human interactions and cultural practices which are in themselves complex. As a consequence the theoretical framework that I have needed has had to be sufficiently responsive. The methodology has had to take into account the many dimensions of activity which constantly change as human interaction takes account of past experience, responds in and to the present context and anticipates the future – a 'perpetual novelty' (Waldrop 1992 p. 145-7). There has been a tension in trying to capture this whilst carrying out analysis which has of necessity been selective and has involved simplification:

Individual experience of any kind is selective. Science simplifies, affective or emotional experiences simplify, and thought itself simplifies. In general, people appear to adapt to and comprehend their experiences through processes that include simplification (Willower 1997 p. 444).

## **Systematic collection of the data**

### *Research plan*

I have sought to place great store on systematically collecting data which was both sufficient and important in order to respond to the research questions. My research plan comprised the collection and analysis of five sets of data: literature from a range of scholarly traditions, notes of meetings, source documents from central government and the LEA, secondary source materials on education and local government from newspapers and journals, and the collection of new data from fifteen semi-structured interviews. I was

able to take into account the large body of existing writing relating to the policy process, particularly in England, including the analysis of micropolitics. I aimed to use to the full the insights and overall understanding of the educational context which the interviewees in general, and the senior officers in particular, were able to bring. However, with the wealth of data and information that has been available I have had to come to terms with reporting only a relatively small amount of this.

### *Interviews – the method for collecting data*

Even though as an officer I am immersed in the policy process, the detailed 'assumptive worlds' (McPherson and Raab 1988 p. 55) of the key participants in the policy areas in which I am involved are not readily accessible on a day to day basis. My research design indicated that interviews would be the most appropriate method to obtain relevant data particularly as they would enable me to explore in depth the knowledge that the participants possessed and to help identify the respective relationships, feelings and values of the participants. I also wanted a tool which would enable me to probe the responses from the participants. I concluded from my experience of using semi-structured interviews in the past, particularly in my IFS, that they provided a common framework for questioning whilst affording flexibility through supplementary questioning and clarifying points.

I have regarded personal interviewing as providing a rich seam of data which was unavailable from documentary evidence or that which was in the public domain. I also wanted to be able to understand the networks of individuals involved in the policy process and their relative influence (Seldon 1988; Fitz and Halpin 1994 p. 34).

I recognise that interviews can be intrusive (Busher 2002 p. 81) although the questions that I asked did not appear to be distressing or uncomfortable to the participants. I sought to sustain a relationship between the interviewees and myself which included personal disclosure, exchange and trust. I also

aimed to be as receptive and sympathetic to what the interviewees were telling me; the interviewees also seemed to be at ease in the interviews.

I have noted Hammersley's (2003) summary of the radical critique of interviews. Although interviews have been the major source of my data I have sought to exercise caution in my use of the material. I have seen the informants 'as witnesses, as self-analysts, and as indirect sources of evidence about perspectives' (p. 122).

Interviewing had the advantage of enabling me to explore micropolitical activity by delving below the summary of the discussions recorded in the LEA's minutes and notes of meetings. I was, therefore, able to understand how the actors sought to use their influence in the policy process, to shape change and to put forward proposals which were in line with their individual interests (Welsh and Frost 2000 p. 219). I believe I would have lost some of the complexity of my material if I had selected survey methods and used statistical techniques.

### *Choice of interviewees*

The number and choice of interviewees was determined by how far I thought they would be able to provide data that would assist me to answer the research questions. I considered that about fifteen interviews would be manageable for this size of research. Using my knowledge of a range of individuals, I identified those people in and associated with the LEA, who I considered had played an influential part in the preparation of the strategic Plans. Annex 5 provides brief biographical information about each of the interviewees; a table showing the coding used for the interviewees is provided on pages 86 and 87. I selected those senior Elected Members – the spokespersons for Education from each of the main political parties – who had taken an active part in the preparation of the Plans. It was my intention to triangulate their accounts with each other. I was able to approach these Councillors with relative ease as I had worked with them previously on school organisation matters. I also approached senior



managers in the LEA known to me who had taken the lead or had made a significant contribution to the production of the strategic Plans. These were my colleagues and they readily agreed to make themselves available for interview. Although I cannot claim that any of these interviews with Councillors and officers might be described as 'elite' as outlined by Ball (1994b), they have described what happened during the preparation of the Plans and provided information about the discourses which shaped the Plans.

I thought it would be useful to obtain as many perspectives as I could on the policy process. One of my colleague officers suggested that I approach people who had contributed to the discussions on the SEN Action Plan; one was the director of a voluntary organisation for parents and the other, a parent who had been outspoken in some of her criticism of the LEA. I was aware from a range of commentators that people who did not have specialist knowledge in an area which was being researched, experienced a relative lack of power in the research process (Halpin 1994 p. 202). In my data analysis I have tried not to overcompensate to enable their voices to be heard. Hughes (1994 p. 192) has indicated that the opinions of lay people, in particular parents, should be treated with greater respect because their views were the outcome of thought and reflection. I trust that I was able to take this advice whilst also appreciating the contributions of all my other interviewees.

I also contacted headteachers and governors who had directly contributed to the respective planning processes; I had known these people through my previous roles in the LEA. Finally I approached a representative of the teachers' professional associations who had been on the advisory group to prepare the EDP; I had known him previously through consultations that I had managed on staffing matters.

Despite several attempts I was not successful in obtaining an interview with a representative of the private sector providing nursery places, and who had contributed to the Early Years Development and Childcare Plan. The data from such an interview could have provided an alternative perspective to the

data collected from the senior manager for Early Years. I felt disappointed with this outcome; however, I considered that I had sufficient data from the sources I have listed.

Spreading the data collection widely had its benefits, as I was able to obtain a broader understanding of the policy process than if I had limited myself to those participants who were directly involved from the LEA. Indeed some of the interviewees not immediately connected with the LEA were pleased to share their views.

The standard questions that I asked are included at Annex 6; these had been refined in discussion with my supervisors. It will be evident that there was a judicious mix of questions to elicit responses on both general and sensitive topics. I produced the questions verbatim on a sheet for my own use to keep me focused during the process. Most of the interviews lasted about an hour and a half; each of the interviewees was most courteous.

The timing of the interviews was important. They were conducted about a year after the Plans were finalised; this time delay may have lessened the sensitivity and moderated an element of controversy surrounding some of the Plans. The interviews were also conducted immediately after the OFSTED inspection of the LEA; it was during this inspection that some of the background surrounding the production of the Plans was under scrutiny. I also recognised when I was analysing my data, that a positive report of the OFSTED inspection of the LEA had been received which referred to the thoroughness with which the strategic Plans had been produced.

The informants shared their experiences fluently and in a thoughtful way. In particular the officers provided much detail and I considered that they sought to be as accurate as possible. The questions were answered with conviction and, in my view, their responses carried weight. I did not form the impression that the participants held back information (Phillips 1998 p. 9), nor did I challenge the narratives which the interviewees provided, although I did seek to clarify a number of points as the interviews proceeded. I also used a

summarising technique to ensure that I had correctly understood the points the respective interviewees had made. I recognised that the interviews were factual accounts of the interviewees' experiences, values and views as well as opportunities for providing information that the interviewees wanted me to know. Using the example of Luttrell (2000 p. 502), at the end of the interviews I reflected on the exchanges between the participants and myself as researcher.

### *Secondary sources*

Secondary source material was relatively easy to obtain as I continue to be a regular reader of the education and local government journals. The LEA had a comprehensive library of material from central government and national organisations and agencies, which was readily accessible. My work as an officer required a working knowledge of a range of documentation relevant to this research as I fulfilled my roles in the LEA. In addition my supervisors and tutors have indicated other sources of relevant materials.

### **Ethical dimensions in relation to this research**

#### *The dilemmas of insider research*

At the outset I wish to explore my frame of reference, my interests, ideology and my experiences as background to this research (Howlett and Ramesh 1995 p. 7). In so doing I acknowledge that data collection methods and analysis are not free from political and ethical concerns (Stanley and Wise 1993 p. 161; Scott 1996 p. 62). In my role within the LEA I have been committed *inter alia* to ensuring through effective planning that the three agendas of raising pupil achievement, school improvement and social inclusion are pursued, in the least bureaucratic way and with the greatest co-operation of other service providers. As an officer, I am part of the discourse which is founded on a rational approach to planning and the use of reasonable strategies to achieve this. As a consequence I have been exercising power and influence to implement such an approach. My work

has also provided me with a platform from which to observe how this rational planning has been influenced by micropolitics.

Following Quicke's (2000 p. 302) view that there have been changes in the way we typically understand the nature of knowledge and what it means to know, I have sought to assess how far my work position and my own predispositions have had an influence on the interview process and the data analysis. It has, however, been difficult to draw any definite conclusions. From the writing of Foucault (1990 cited in Busher 2002 p. 76) I recognise that my position in the LEA will have put limits on my actions and constrained my views. I accept that these factors, together with my commitment to social concern that seeks to make society more fair and equitable, would have influenced the selection and presentation of evidence, conclusions drawn by Dunleavy and O'Leary (1987 pp. 337-8): 'ethics and epistemology are thus two sides of the same coin' (Scott 1996 p. 70). The discussion I have entered into with myself has been similar to the dialogue I have had with the data arising from the interviews during the data analysis where I have considered assumptions, values and motives for action. This process has been succinctly encapsulated by Scott (2000):

If then, we are making value judgements all the time, we are involved in the power relations which characterise policy-making (p. 143).

I recognised that as an officer of the LEA I was not operating on a level plain with the interviewees, for not only was I as interviewer in control (Ball 1983 pp. 93-5), but also I had some status in the LEA. I briefly explained my role to those interviewees with whom I had not worked previously. I was conscious of my own position of power from the time I began to formulate my research question even to the point of struggling to write these words. At the outset as I framed my research proposal, I had in-depth discussions with my supervisors about the tensions that could arise from the subject under discussion and how I would position myself as both researcher and as an education officer. Having considered the views of Halpin (1994 p. 200) about restricting research to uncontroversial matters I decided I did not want to be

constrained by investigating and reporting on a safe and superficial aspect of the policy process, as this would not have provided sufficient challenge.

I think that the Elected Members and I had some difficulties in separating out my research role from my officer role. Interestingly Elected Members reiterated to me as a researcher their clear view that they ultimately had a decision-making role in the LEA. By implication, I as an officer could be seen, therefore, as someone who provided advice, which in one sense could be regarded as subsidiary to making a decision. This position was not unknown to me as it was associated with the introduction of the Cabinet system within the Council. It would be reasonable to say that both the Members and I felt some discomfort as we each had some detailed knowledge about the other; it was a salutary reminder that 'data are politics and discourse' (Batteson and Ball 1995 p. 214).

Even though some of my colleague officers were in senior positions to myself, the environment in which we worked was in many respects non-hierarchical. It was clear that as a researcher I was coming to the project with less knowledge of the material and less information on the process than my colleagues with their particular specialisms. Thus power was being indirectly exercised in the work environment, even though this may not have been wittingly recognised by my colleague officers who I interviewed.

Of particular interest was how the parent and the director of the parent group who I had not known previously would receive me. Both interviewees were sufficiently confident in making their comments that I did not feel I was exercising undue influence over them. I experienced a similar feeling of satisfaction in relation to the interviews with governors, headteachers and a representative of the teachers' professional associations.

It is not at all clear whether some of the interviewees were more or less willing to talk to me as an inside researcher; I did seek to reassure those not directly employed by the LEA that their comments would not be used for the purposes of the LEA. From the point of view of the interviewees, who were

not directly working in County Hall, I was expected to know about the general context of the education service. Indeed they took the opportunity during the interviews to make use of whatever influence they thought I could bring to bear to advance their particular agendas; a matter identified by Wallace *et al.* (1994 p.176). At the very least they expected me to be benign and willing to answer questions about LEA policy; near the other end of the continuum some expected me to give my own views on the actions taken by my colleagues and Elected Members – I felt it was inappropriate to do so. A further dimension to the micropolitical activity between the interviewees and myself as researcher can be found in the reciprocity that came from the interviewees as their self-worth was enhanced by being provided with opportunities ‘to be valued, knowledgeable and interesting’ (Skeggs 1994 p. 81).

I have been especially aware that my role in the LEA has provided opportunities to have privileged access to the notes and minutes of meetings associated with the preparation of the respective Plans. These ranged from the minutes of public meetings of the Advisory Group contributing to the preparation of the EDP to the notes of the private meetings of Elected Members considering the SEN Action Plan. In regard to the latter, there could have been some political sensitivity as these notes would not normally have been made public although as an officer I could have requested sight of them if they were associated with my day to day work. However, in my judgement, the notes were written in such a summary form that their contents were unlikely to be sensitive. Overall, having access to such detailed information enabled me to cross-reference the outcomes of data analysis and provided the foundation for the development of insight into the policy process.

Although I was undertaking insider research, I had not been directly involved in the preparation of the four Plans under discussion, therefore, I hope I have been able to bring a degree of objectivity to the research process. This was not as straightforward as it might seem, for in the interviews I am sure I was

privileged to be party to a degree of frankness and openness which might not have been accessible to a complete outsider.

There has been a further bi-product of undertaking insider research. I did not seek opportunities for covert research nor to obtain data without the knowledge of those I interviewed. It is possible that after I had collected the data, my analysis may have been informed by my knowledge of the participants in a range of other contexts, as identified by Arnold (1994 p. 190). Nonetheless I have sought to be as detached as possible from the interviewees and the data they provided, with the aim of seeking objectivity, even if I have never fully achieved it, a point identified by Walford (1994b p. 96). At times I wondered whether I have been too critical in my interpretation of some of the actions of the interviewees directly associated with the LEA – and wonder whether I have sought to overcompensate for being an insider undertaking research. Whatever is the case, I have sought to present the analysis in a non-threatening way; in itself this has been a type of ‘self-censorship’ with its attendant set of ethical dilemmas (Ozga and Gewirtz 1994 p. 124).

There have also been advantages to undertaking insider research. I have had an unparalleled view of the context and detailed knowledge of the key features and events in the LEA; as a result I have been able to understand some of the subtleties associated with these. Further I have been able to assess the implications of pursuing particular lines of enquiry, an advantage identified by Griffiths (1985 p. 211).

Without being complacent, I have come to the conclusion after much reflection, that in working towards objectivity the distinction I sought to draw between my roles and the methods I have adopted, have been the best I could have hoped to achieve in relation to this research.

### *Preparing the interviewees*

My initial contact to explain the purposes of the research and to gain informed consent was face to face for officers who were in County Hall and by telephone for the others. I felt using the telephone would make it easier for the potential interviewee to refuse to participate. Once the interviews were arranged I tried to impress upon the interviewees that this was a piece of research which was associated with a rigorous study and would not be used directly by the LEA.

Building up a sense of trust between myself as researcher and the interviewees was achieved in part by writing to each of the interviewees outlining the major areas I wished to cover without going into the detail of the individual questions. The interviewees appreciated having notification of these matters. I also explained what it was I was researching and why I wanted to conduct the interview; I reinforced these matters at the beginning of each interview; a point emphasised by Phillips (1998 p. 9). Walford (1994a p. 84) has indicated that such an approach could demonstrate the sincerity of the researcher to the research project. This is not to say that I thought it necessary to explain my theoretical approach; indeed I had not articulated to any one the initial approach that I would be adopting at the data collection stage; however, I did note from Ozga and Gewirtz (1994 p. 122) that theorising and data collection were inseparable.

### *Safeguarding the interviewees*

In the main the interviews were conducted in the offices of the participants with four interviews arranged in the LEA's office accommodation (familiar to the interviewees) and one interview conducted in the home of a parent. These arrangements were deliberately chosen as I hoped each interviewee would feel at ease and that familiar settings would give them as much control over the proceedings as possible. Ozga and Gewirtz (1994), however, have explored how such approaches to trust building can have implications for the presentation of the results of research:



Perhaps each 'side ' colluded in the self-conscious self-presentation of the other. They offered an unthreatening, interested and sympathetic version of the self; they offered a smooth and polished self-presentation, including hospitality and courtesy (p. 131).

I have recognised some similarities from my own experience with these conclusions. Although the individuals that I met did not have the same reputation to sustain as those in the sample of Ozga and Gewirtz (1994 p. 130), I felt they shared the same desire to put themselves forward in the best possible light.

Renzatti and Lee (1993) have considered the notion of sensitivity in social research. At the heart of their definition is the idea of 'threat' with which I can identify:

A sensitive topic is one that potentially poses for those involved a substantial threat, the emergence of which renders problematic for the researcher and/or the researched the collection, holding and/or dissemination of research data (cited in Hughes 1994 p. 194).

In this respect, therefore, I sought to be sensitive (cf. Lee 1993 cited in Phillips 1998 p. 9) to those interviewees who might have been anxious about the light that my findings might shed on them. Taking into account Wallace *et al.*'s (1994 p. 181) comments about not doing harm to any individual involved in a study, I made it clear that any data arising from the interviews would be referred to anonymously. Safeguarding the identity of my interviewees has been important particularly as many of the Elected Members and senior officers have continued to be part of the policy process. In addition I have not referred directly to the name of the LEA which has been the subject of the research. Consequently I felt I was able to win over the trust of the interviewees and perhaps enhanced my status as researcher. The interviewees might have concluded that I would not have included any matter which was politically or professionally indiscreet. In this respect they would have been correct. It was here that there has been an obvious tension between my role as researcher and my role as an education officer, for in the latter role I have always taken seriously the importance of maintaining the good reputation of the Council. Overall, however, I do not think the themes

which have arisen have been sufficiently sensitive as to compromise the interviewees.

I have retained the tapes of the interviews for the purposes of referring to my source data for the analysis; I will only be keeping the data in the future for the purposes of preparing any possible journal articles.

### *Authenticity of the data*

My research design has sought to take into account and understand the interpretations which the participants gave to their actions. Greenfield (1973 cited in Samier 2002 p. 27) has emphasised the importance of individual interpretations of events which were likely to differ according to the participants' values, experiences and backgrounds. The constructions by the participants of the past were 'on an equal footing in so far as they [were] believable to those holding them' (Willower 1997 p. 441). I have also acknowledged that the actors' accounts have given new meaning to their past by taking into account the present (Scott 1996 p. 66); in many respects this was a sophisticated process and I as interviewer could have been part of the interviewee's power game (Ball 1994b pp. 113-14). Interestingly, however, there was a considerable degree of similarity in the descriptions of events provided by the interviewees. I have recognised that the revealed picture can be only partial (Hammersley 1992 p. 51).

I was not expecting congruence or precise and detailed knowledge from my data sources. I recognise that the data I collected through the interview process was a function of both how the interviewees and I interacted during the interview process and how they represented their past actions. There was an overlap between the interview responses of the Councillors and the officers, as the officers would have advised the three group spokespersons during their discussions of the Plans. I had to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of these links. There were benefits in that I could compare a range of events from different perspectives, however, the disadvantage was that I might have limited the scope of my data collection to a relatively small

number of these events. Overall I found the interviews covered a broad range of areas and as a result I was provided with opportunities to compare accounts of particular events.

I felt that positive relationships were built up between each interviewee and myself, in part aided by my previous work with most of the interviewees. I decided that I wanted a complete record of each interview to ensure I would not miss any response which might have relevance to the data analysis, therefore, each interview was recorded and completely transcribed. At the end of each interview I asked the interviewee whether s/he would wish to see the transcript of the interview. Of the eleven transcripts that were requested only two were returned to me; one with a significant number of amendments where the interviewee wished to clarify his comments; the other transcript contained two very minor grammatical changes. One person responded that she felt that she had not been particularly articulate and expressed a wish to revise the transcript – this did not materialise.

#### *Disseminating the outcomes to the participants*

Writing up the outcomes of the research has not been straightforward; not because the content of the strategic Plans has been sensitive, rather because the focus has been on micropolitical activity. The interviewees would not have been aware that this was the purpose of the research: indeed it was only as I interacted with the data that this theme became apparent. However, I am committed to providing an extended abstract to the participants who helped me with the research as indicated by Sammons (1989 p. 55) once the thesis has been examined.

#### **Analysing data**

I have taken note of Ball's (1991) observations that researchers 'carry over' sections of data, and concepts and comparisons which they have developed as they move from one research enterprise to another (p. 167). Although I have not engaged in a series of research projects, I have sought to build on

the conclusions that arose from my institution focused study (Durrant 2000). I am aware that some of the approaches I adopted for that study have provided the foundation for this research. However, I have sought to develop my analysis into new areas by focusing on a more extensive set of data and by using a more coherent theoretical framework, informed by wider reading.

I made a decision that it would be possible to analyse the data manually using a standard word processing package. Each transcript was given a different colour to enable me to identify the source of the interview. As the data collection proceeded my initial ideas and views were gradually refined. An initial analysis, extending to 129 pages, was undertaken categorising the data into twenty-seven broad themes in a table; in one column notes were kept of links between the themes. This initial analysis was further refined as there were too many themes to provide a focus to the thesis; the result of this prioritisation was an aggregation of the data into nine broad themes.

At this stage I began to refine my analysis further by considering conceptual models which could be derived from the data to indicate how individuals were contributing to the policy process. One important feature of the analysis was that disparate themes and areas of interest were identified at different stages in the analysis. As I interacted with the data and wrestled with the themes I began to narrow down the focus of the research. Throughout this process I recognised that I was in a position of power as I interpreted the data.

At the mid stage of the data analysis I examined the conceptual framework provided by Humes (1997)<sup>1</sup> and wrote up some initial conclusions (Durrant 2001). However, this framework proved to be too broad for this relatively small research project. I therefore began to explore in detail how micropolitical activity was involved in the policy process associated with refining central government policy. In particular a number of interconnected themes relating to micropolitical activity began to emerge.

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<sup>1</sup> This has five dimensions: ideology, people, institutions, issues and culture; the relative importance of which may vary over time.

In my analysis I sought to focus on the interviewees' perceptions of the way in which micropolitical activity influenced the policy process. I did not seek an explanation of these perceptions by reference to individual agency through 'psychoanalytic or psychological analyses [which] are frequently mobilised in response to resistance' (Ball 1990a p. 158), as this was beyond the scope of my analytical tools.

I wanted to identify what I considered to be the most important elements of micropolitical activity without being side-tracked by a focus on the influence of the most immediate or obvious factors (Levin 2001 p. 27), or recounting the fine detail of the worlds of those who I had interviewed. In addition I wanted to keep a balance between the key figures that contributed to the policy process, the 'personalisation of policy' (Ball 1994b p. 112), and the overall context in which these participants were operating (McPherson and Raab 1988 p. xii). Through 'reflexive flexibility' (Ball 1990c p. 159) I was able to manage this shift in focus whilst maintaining the spirit of my original aims, even though these were modified in the light of my data analysis, a factor identified also by Paechter (2000 p. 34).

## **Validity**

At the heart of the approach to my research has been my commitment to present the most honest account possible of the data. I have been aware and acknowledge that there might be errors (Oakley 2000 p. 72) and in this section I will discuss the measures that I have put in place to minimise the effects arising from my methodology and methods.

Through discussions with my supervisors about, and my own reflection on, the data analysis I sought to recognise, explore and minimise my own bias and subjectivity. I addressed the possibility of bias arising from the insider perspective by the use of triangulation, through the use of notes of meetings and alternative accounts of the same event and through external corroboration, achieved in some respect, by the OFSTED inspection process.

In this particular context the OFSTED inspection of the LEA that was completed whilst the data for research was being collected, indicated that the LEA had undertaken effective consultations as part of the process for producing its Plans<sup>2</sup>. I also sought to explore alternative explanations of the data and to be as clear and rigorous as possible in my analysis.

I sought to achieve external validity by situating my research in the context of other current research on education policy. Although mine is a small-scale study in the field of education policy, I have aimed to consider some of the concepts such as structure and agency in order to think through some of the complexities associated with education policy (Ozga 1990 pp. 359-60).

My values as a researcher cannot but be a factor when analysing data collected through the interviews of those who have been at the centre of the policy process at the local level (cf. Griffiths 1998 cited in Halliday 2002 p. 49). I would support Griffiths as she acknowledged that her 'set of values guides decisions about what is researched and how and why'. Far from this meaning that the research was 'biased and suspect', for her, the research was 'improved' by this acknowledgement (Griffiths 1998 p. 130).

I have previously referred to the bias which the interviewees brought to their accounts; nevertheless, the accounts which I have used were a reminder that these were real people engaged in real events (Fitz and Halpin 1994 p. 33). Using my knowledge of the context was helpful as it enabled me to probe the discourse of the interviewees and to maintain some distance and detachment from what they were saying.

The status of the different types of material I had collected posed a dilemma. For instance I had to assess whether the formal notes of meetings were as valid as the interview data and whether some interviewees were more

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<sup>2</sup> 'Headteachers were well consulted about the contents of the [EDP] Plan at the draft stage and most felt it addressed the right priorities...The LEA has a coherent policy and strategy for special educational needs (SEN) based on a comprehensive review and analysis of need and a thorough consultation process' (OFSTED 2001).

reliable than others. On reflection I think the use of triangulation methods have assisted in this process.

From my experience of this research I would support the overall view of Deem and Brehony (1994) that validity might be best thought of as something which is to be worked towards rather than something which can be fully achieved (p. 165). Throughout the research I have been conscious that along with other qualitative research, 'we can only do our best' (Kogan 1994 p. 77) and that my research is only as valid as my own judgements and interpretations of the data and evidence (Thomas 2002 p. 431).

## **Conclusion**

I have not sought to separate the 'theorising' from data collection, rather I have sought to be open to theoretical ideas emerging from the data and its analysis (Paechter 2000 p. 35). In accord with Ozga and Gewirtz (1994 p. 122) I sought to question my theoretical reflections and their connected concepts to illuminate the policy process.

I have learnt the skills of testing the validity of the evidence, undertaking and writing up research, recognising the audience and selecting an open style. The confidence I have gained through understanding my work context has been a major part of my professional development. In particular it has encouraged me to reflect critically on my values, be more aware of these values and indeed has shaped these values. On the downside such confidence in my own position may have led me on some occasions to be more critical of the views of others if their views did not appear to be based on sufficient evidence.

Although Clegg *et al.* (2002 p. 131) have reported that some doubt has been cast on the clarity of Schön's (1991) concept of the 'reflective practitioner', I am using the term to indicate that one outcome of my research has been the opportunity to reflect on the context in which I work. Consequently I have also sought to understand the extent of negative power and influence which

is exercised by myself and those with whom I work; I have been seeking to limit the excesses of the use of such power.

The research process has raised further questions in my mind. From the multi-perspective view which Greenfield advocated and which I have sought to adopt through my research design, I have been engaged in a moral process to understand people more fully. Consequently I have sought to take them into account, appreciating their points of view, backgrounds and perspectives (Greenfield 1993e p. 260). Having also come to understand in some way the benefits of exercising power and influence, I have deliberated about whether and how to use micropolitical strategies in order to contribute to certain policy decisions. It raises the moral question of how far I might use my knowledge of micropolitics to advance what I consider to be important matters and whether following reflection this could be regarded as an appropriate outcome of the research process – issues raised also by Elliott (1989 pp. 97-8) in relation to teachers, and O'Hanlon (1994 pp. 282-3).

At the outset of this chapter I indicated that the ethical dimension in my research has been of critical importance – it has permeated every stage of this research. Throughout I have sought to maintain the highest ethical standards recognising that there have been tensions as the whole research enterprise has been complex, involving as it has human interaction.



## **CHAPTER 4 THE MICROPOLITICAL ACTIVITY OF THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE LEA AS THEY EXERCISED THEIR EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS**

### **Introduction**

The analysis in this and the following chapter is grounded in the research questions I outlined in Chapter 1 i.e. how the Elected Members, officers, headteachers, governors and parents were involved in the policy process and how micropolitical activity was demonstrated during the preparation of the strategic Plans. The analysis is also linked to the discussion I entered into in Chapter 2 regarding micropolitical activity and power.

I have already indicated in the Introduction that micropolitical activity is complex because at its centre are human relationships; it is not surprising, therefore, that the data which I have collected has reflected this complexity. The themes arising from my data analysis are not discrete, rather they are interconnected and as such a further element of complexity has been layered into my research. Consequently I will be using elements of the data on more than one occasion to illustrate a range of themes. Further, in view of the centrality of the contributions of Members and officers to the Plans, there is a degree of overlap between the themes discussed in this chapter and those in the next.

In this chapter I will be seeking:

- i) to provide an overview of the interviewees' contributions to the policy process;
- ii) to identify the influence of the interviewees' principles on their actions during the preparation of the Plans;
- iii) to examine the interviewees' comments on the role of central government in setting the overall context for the policy process, and to set these in the context of the brief debate I entered into in relation to structure and agency in my review of the literature;

- iv) to identify those key points where Members and officers respectively exercised the main influence on the policy process and where such influence was shared between them.

### **Overview of the contribution of the interviewees to the policy process**

My data shows there was evidence of a significant amount of co-operation and commitment to collectivity and altruism on behalf of the interviewees; these features have been noted generally in the research by McLaughlin (1997 cited in McCalla 2002 p. 45) and specifically in the production of the Plans. All the interviewees<sup>1</sup> had significant experience within the education service and/or in the policy process. Each interviewee was familiar with contributing to debate and discussion; this enabled her/him to make effective contributions to the policy process, where so much depended on the ability to put forward reasoned views. Such experience was a medium through which power and influence was exercised. A summary in tabular form of the key used to identify the respective interviewees through the text is as follows:

<b>Reference</b>	<b>Role of interviewee</b>
P1	Representative of a parents' group serving the County
P2	A parent who had been the chairperson of a local parents' support group
C1	Senior Conservative Councillor, last Chairman of the Education Committee, and school governor
C2	Senior Labour Councillor, previously Chairman of the Education Committee, District Councillor and school governor
C3	Senior Liberal Democrat Councillor, previously Chairman of the Education Committee, Borough Councillor and school governor
O1	Assistant Director of Education with responsibility for the strategic development of the education service
O2	Senior manager with responsibility for special educational needs; a chartered educational psychologist

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<sup>1</sup> I have already indicated that Annex 5 has a summary of the background of each of the interviewees. Each interviewee has been given a reference; this will be used in the text of this analysis to identify the contributions of the respective interviewees.

Reference	Role of interviewee
O3	Senior manager with responsibility for developing early years and childcare services
O4	Senior officer involved with the development of special education provision
G1	Chair of a governing body; previously chair of the governors' association in the County
G2	Chair of a governing body; this person also had a role in a national governors' organisation
H1	Headteacher of a special school; an executive member of the association of managers in special schools in the County
H2	Headteacher of a secondary school and chair of the local association of secondary school headteachers
H3	Headteacher of an infant school; an executive member of the association of primary headteachers in the County
T1	County secretary of a large professional association for teachers

Although it is not possible to state categorically that the content of each Plan was determined by the influence exercised by an individual or a particular group of participants, the process for considering the contents, and the contents themselves, were a product of the interrelationships of the participants. The representatives in these groups i.e. Members, officers, headteachers and governors, became agents operating in settings which were not necessarily of their own making. Ultimately, however, they contributed to change in the education service and the LEA; both Cibulka (1994 p. 120) and Scott (1994 p. 41) have drawn similar general conclusions in other settings.

### **A discussion of how the actions of the interviewees were influenced by the principles that the interviewees held**

A theme coming from my data is that the actions of the participants in the policy process were influenced by the principles which they held; it is this that I wish to explore briefly. Many of the principles associated with education were held in common by the interviewees, however, the application of these principles to the content of the Plans, for instance, contributed to the

micropolitical activity in the policy process. It is important to note that the principles and actions were not linked in a clear and smooth way.

It was evident that each interviewee was fundamentally committed to education and that s/he was determined to achieve what s/he saw as being in the best interests of children. This was perhaps most graphically expressed by a senior officer (O3) whose whole equilibrium would be shaken – ‘this would disturb me, or rock me on my perch’ – if she lost this commitment. She referred to ‘the moral, even the spiritual, dimension’ (O3) and recognised that this part of her had to be satisfied.

Interviewees (O3), (C1) and (C2) articulated their commitment to achieving the best possible outcomes for all children identified by Deem (1994) in relation to governors; this is perhaps best illustrated in particular by the following comment:

I've got a clear view, it's true of my whole professional life – I'm here to make a difference for kids...[this is] wrapped up in those public sector values which are the prime motivators in terms of the people that I believe in this business (O2).

Miech and Elder (1996) have identified such people as:

Idealists, [who] view their careers as a means to serve the larger society, usually through their influence on other people (p. 238).

However, beyond these educational principles, the actions of individual participants during the policy process began to diverge from those of the other participants. Each individual exercised flexibility of mind as s/he was confronted by the choices to be made between competing principles and the practical realities during the complex process of preparing the Plans. Further, the participants also had to take into account the actions of other interviewees and the ‘contrary pulls built into the text of the culture’ (Erickson 1976 p. 82). Difficulties arose where generalised statements had to be converted into commitments and where action had to be prioritised (P1). What has been interesting in this analysis is the way in which certain principles e.g. parental preference, or the concern for the education of the

individual or democratic accountability, gained prominence in the decisions that had to be taken.

Those who contributed to the process of preparing the Plans variously recognised that their influence was both circumscribed and given weight, as they had to take into account the views of their colleagues in those organisations which they represented. The director of a parents' support group acknowledged that although she might wish to promote the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools in the long term, she had to reflect the wide spectrum of views of the parents in relation to inclusion – the organisation could not be seen to be favouring one group above another (P1).

There were a number of instances which demonstrated how representing the views of others was not straightforward. One headteacher recognised 'when push comes to shove when I am sitting there I can only respond as me. It is a perpetual dilemma' (H1). Another headteacher echoed this sentiment when he acknowledged that 'it is always difficult not to be influenced by your own personal views' (H3). A governor indicated:

my discussions and conversations with them [other governors], the seminars and meetings I've attended certainly inform quite distinctly the views that I might express on a particular issue. Occasionally one runs the risk of getting a bee in one's bonnet; one's got to guard against it (G2).

These brief comments illustrate the importance of the views of the participants<sup>2</sup>; notwithstanding this point, further into this analysis I will be emphasising that much of the policy process was influenced by chance, or was subject to micropolitical processes and 'muddling through' (Trowler 1998 p.51).

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<sup>2</sup> A more detailed discussion of the linkages between educational values and personal values is, regrettably, beyond the scope of this particular study.

## **The participants' views of the influence of central government on setting policy**

### *Central government policy grounded in a local context*

In my review of the literature I spent some time acknowledging the importance of central government in setting the overall policy framework and steering the outcomes of local government by using the levers of power. In this section I wish to use the comments from the interviewees to provide insights from their perspective on this theme, for it is within the context of central government policy that micropolitical activity was demonstrated and power exercised.

In relation to the four Plans under consideration, the LEA met all the costs and its officers co-ordinated the work<sup>3</sup>, while central government maintained the power of veto as a number of the Plans had to be submitted to the Secretary of State for approval or comment. The interviewees acknowledged the influence of central government. One interviewee indicated that the government could have 'just told us what to do' (O4) however, there was a degree of subtlety; for instance, in the case of the SEN Action Plan the government indicated that it had to be demand driven. Therefore, each policy had to be contextualised in a local setting with the result that across the country the Plans have been 'produced' rather than 'reproduced' (Bowe *et al.* 1992 p. 120) and written with different emphases, whilst at the same time meeting the requirements of central government objectives.

I have already indicated that it would have been counter-productive for central government to have written totally prescriptive terms of reference (Scott 1994 pp. 42-3), therefore, there was room for manoeuvre and some Members were keen to take a lead on the policy agenda, rather than being 'forced into it' (C1) by central government. For instance, the last Chairman of

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<sup>3</sup> Central government officials were available to give detailed advice and provide clarification on Regulations as necessary.

the Education Committee wanted to see more coherent services for children through greater collaboration between Social Services and Education before this was formally promoted by central government.<sup>4</sup>

At times when there was some opposition to the LEA's proposals, Members and officers found it useful to indicate to stakeholders, particularly in consultations with parents on the SEN Action Plan, that central government had set the agenda (O4). This approach also had its down side for it could seem:

from outside [the LEA] and even the inside, "It's all being run by government and we are just agencies." Members are decorative rather than performing any real role (C3).

However, Members acknowledged that there would not have been any point in developing Plans if everything came from Whitehall and local government was just a rubber stamp (C3).

A Councillor provided an insight into the interaction of government policy with the activities of officers. He thought officers used their influence as they sought to encourage the change being promoted by central government and 'to channel it in a way that is productive, not just to resist change or be chaotic or reactive' (C3). Officers frequently saw themselves in the influential role of 'change agents' (O4), a point I wish to return to later in this analysis.

### *Limitations of local influence on central government policies*

My data shows that in many respects the contributions that the interviewees were able to make to central government policies were painted on a relatively small canvas. This was evident in the case of the representatives of the LEA; one officer indicated that:

the education service is moving out of the orbit of local government; there are huge areas that are really not open to Member policy particularly, and it is down to officers to respond to a national agenda... we have to be moving forward on certain

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<sup>4</sup> The Secretary of State for Health has promoted the concept of Children's Trusts (Milburn 2002). The DfES has also been supporting and 'Schools Plus' (DfEE 2000b) and 'Extended Schools' (DfES 2002b).

agendas, whether Members like that or not. Probably sometimes our *modus operandi* is more about trying to make that as palatable as possible to Members rather than it being something that is initiated by them (O2).

The acknowledgement that Members had limited influence on central government policies was mirrored in the comments of the other stakeholders in the education service. There was a degree of pragmatism from the secondary school headteacher who recognised that a number of the education policies of central government were in tension:

If the DfEE or Mr Blunkett himself or the LEA come out with a policy with which we vehemently disagree, then we are likely to stick with the governors and parents because they are the ones we work most closely with (H2).

Through his rhetoric he acknowledged that influence which was close at hand was greater than that which was more distant. In a sense this also highlighted the complexity of the policy process for his statement is in contrast to the view that central government wholly determines policy. However, I would suggest that such discretion that was available could only be exercised in the crevices in national policy or in those policy areas which were not of fundamental importance; it would have been unwise to have taken action that was illegal.

There were varying perceptions of the amount of influence that the representatives of the LEA were able to exercise to object to government policy. The primary school headteacher, for instance, was concerned that the LEA was not prepared to moderate the proposals from central government:

[the LEA] has always been a bit inclined to interpret what the government said very literally...it seems to go straight from the government without touching the brain at all (H3).

In contrast a parent felt that the LEA had used central government policy in relation to the SEN Action Plan to pursue its own agenda for the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools; she indicated that the LEA:

had interpreted the Plan in a different way to everybody else...it wasn't necessarily what David Blunkett was meaning...I think people feel it has been taken to an extreme level (P2).



Both comments provide evidence of 'translation' i.e. through responding to external policy various other questions and issues were dealt with and answered (Knip and Van der Vegt 1991 p. 129 cf. 'writerly' text Bowe *et al.* 1992 pp. 11-12). There was criticism of the LEA, therefore, on two complementary counts. First, that Members and officers absorbed the central government priorities such that these became integrated into their own thinking, a general conclusion drawn by Bottery and Wright (1996 p. 94); cf. also the second and third faces of power (Bachrach and Baratz (1970) and Lukes (1974) respectively). Consequently officers were not prepared to use their influence to make central government policies more palatable to schools. Second, that the LEA was using the government agenda for its own purposes. I would suggest that the criticism was expressed because some interviewees perceived that the agendas of both central government and officers in the LEA were very similar. In part this might be explained by the duty that officers had to implement central government policy and in this respect officers had limited power. Members could have sought to modify central government policy; however, on the basis of previous experience in the Council, this would have been most unlikely. From the perspective of the representative of the teachers' association, Members and officers in LEAs were caught between central government setting the direction of policy and the schools which had the responsibility for delivering the detail of the policy (T1).

These comments from the interviewees reinforce the summary of the literature that I provided in Chapter 2 in relation to the centrality of the government setting policy. However, my data analysis in the subsequent sections demonstrates that agency was a key feature in defining and shaping policy and it is to this I now wish to turn.

## **The key points where Elected Members exercised influence**

### *The political context*

It is quite clear from my evidence that Elected Members and officers were particularly involved in micropolitical activity in the production of the Plans – I will examine first the involvement of Members. Although party politics provided the backdrop for the consideration and approval of the Plans by Members, a senior officer was of the view that the LEA was:

not ideologically driven, there is a fair amount of consensus across the three parties; in a way that is unusual, but not unusual in shire counties, but unusual in local government overall (O1).

Even in the context of the SEN Action Plan where there was considerable discussion there was not:

a strong sense of politicisation...there is an issue of saying "If the schools are happy, the parents are happy; if the children are happy then probably the Members are happy too" (O2).

Indeed the Plans were created in a climate where the culture of change had to be seen as acceptable to the LEA, 'where things needed to be seen as evolutionary... because revolution doesn't go down well here' (O1) and where incremental change led to stability.

There was a tension in the views expressed by some Members about their leadership role and how they might exercise their influence. One senior Member spoke of the importance of democratic accountability, expressing the view that he and his colleagues should be able to balance out some of the pressures from interest groups within the local community. He also explained that Councillors, unlike officers, could go out on a limb because Members were not dependent for their livelihood on membership of the Council; however, he did recognise that it entailed being strong minded and analytical. He saw that for the greater good of the community, Members needed to develop a wider perspective, to step outside their insularity, and to have clarity of vision (C3) – all competencies identified in primary school headteachers by Johnston and Pickersgill (1997 p. 151). These comments

clearly illustrate the conclusions drawn by McCalla (2002) in relation to the exercise of benign power. In contrast, however, some Members felt that their influence was legitimised through the views of their electorates or public opinion and did not wish to go too far ahead of either (O2). There was a recognition that the votes of the electorate could be influenced both by the process for producing the Plans as well as the outcomes of the Plans. A balance was required between achieving long-term policy objectives and taking account of short-term political pressures. In the case of the SEN Action Plan, Members:

actually wanted to know what people were feeling out there, what parents were feeling and to what extent did we need to slightly adapt our approach in order to take account of the views of the people whose children, for example, are in special schools (O4).

In contrast to being responsive to their electorates, some Members appeared to consider their own needs and interests. Although they had been elected to carry out the wishes of the electorate, they had little or no detailed mandate for the contents of statutory and strategic Plans.<sup>5</sup> It could be argued that in such circumstances Members were not elected to fulfil the specific views of the electorate; rather, because they broadly shared the same framework of principles, they could be generally trusted to make decisions which were in the best interests of those they represented (Halstead 1994 p. 159).

Although two senior Councillors (C1, C3) sought to be true to themselves, they saw the exercise of power and influence as being a means to an end. It was evident from my data that the Councillors were not contributing to the policy process in a vacuum; rather their views were influenced by the wider networks of their electorates and their political parties. For instance one Councillor gave a priority to representing her electorate as faithfully as possible (C1). A second Councillor recognised his commitment to those 'who elected us to do something for them, not for ourselves' (C3). Although he

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<sup>5</sup> In part this would be explained by the fact that Members were elected before the New Labour Government had arranged for its policy proposals to be converted into legislation.

was committed to loyalty to his political party, he also recognised that he had to live with himself and that:

there were compromises which had to be made, to one's own personal integrity... Otherwise you are not going to survive or achieve the greater interest of all (C3).

Although appointed to serve their electorates some Councillors were not totally trusted to exercise their influence for the benefit of the community as illustrated by the comments of the director of a parents' support group. She was concerned about Councillors being lobbied and that some were concentrating on the next round of elections (P1)<sup>6</sup>. This same person did, however, recognise that some 'politicians were prepared to stand by [their] principles' (P1).

In general my analysis suggests that although single issues such as the contents of statutory Plans might be important to some parts of the electorate, any conflicts arising from the consultation on the content of these Plans could not be isolated from a range of other issues, both local and national, which might come to the forefront in local elections. Indeed it was likely that disagreement over the detail of any of the Plans would be forgotten at the time of local elections with the voters turning to wider issues.

#### *The political context – changes in the composition of the Council*

My data suggests that changes in the political composition of the Council<sup>7</sup> had an influence on the preparation of some of the Plans. For instance while the SEN Action Plan was being prepared, the chairmanship of the relevant Member Panel altered as a result of a number of changes of political allegiance across the Council; subsequently the tone of the meetings of the Panel changed:

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<sup>6</sup> The fact that the interview was taking place three months before the expected date of the next local and general elections may have had an influence on this response.

<sup>7</sup> A table setting out the relevant changes to the composition of the Council can be found in the Introduction.

it made it more difficult because it made it then look as if the others had to oppose...it became more difficult to have common ground (O4).

One Member also noted a similar degree of negativity, for there seemed to be opposition for the sake of opposition (C3). Bonal (2000 p. 210) has noted that sometimes conflicts between participants can arise even though they may hold similar ideological principles. However, it has been noted that there could be advantages to having different points of view expressed in dynamic and complex institutions because new problems might be identified earlier than in a like-minded close-knit group (Fullan 1993 p. 35). In this context, Ham and Hill (1993 p. 61) have noted that public officials were able to adjust to changes in their political masters as long as these did not involve violent ideological shifts.

The activities of Members were clearly set within a local political framework which in turn provided the context for their micropolitical activity. This was not an unexpected feature of the landscape in which Members exercised power as they were local politicians, appointed through the political process and responsible to their electorates. In order to explore further the exercise of power by Members, I wish to turn to an examination of their involvement in decision-making.

#### *Elected Members' responsibility for decision-making*

From my evidence I have concluded that Elected Members were clear they were responsible for making decisions. In this section, building on the comments in the previous section about the influence of their electorates, I wish to propose that decision-making could be a relatively complex process and one in which micropolitical activity was a main constituent.

It was not surprising that Councillors were clear about their contribution:

Members can think for themselves how they like to see things and it might conflict with what officers might think at times.... If I haven't approved of [Plans or suggestions] I am prepared to say, "Well, I would like this that and the other"... if officers put their names to any particular Plan, they should see it through

and they should expect it to be altered through the democratic process (C2).

One headteacher was of the view that the production of the strategic Plans was:

best managed, created and implemented by the professionals, by whom I mean the schools and the LEA [i.e. officers]. I wouldn't be too happy if politicians meddled too much (H2).

This was not as straightforward as it might seem at first sight: the representative of one of the teachers' associations recognised the value of the democratic safeguards provided by the politicians. Councillors could look at the strategic direction otherwise 'paid officials would direct what ought to be a democratic process' (T1).

Where Members were not involved in directly framing the content of a Plan, for example the Early Years Plan, officers noted that:

Members were quite worried for a while about who these people<sup>8</sup> were...and whether there was a parallel democratic process going on (O3).

In contrast to these observations officers had to reassure the Partnership that its representatives would have to trust the early years manager to take forward a compromise of 'the best fix that Members require and where you want to go' (O3). In essence this demonstrated that Members who had traditionally been in a powerful position wished to maintain their influence and confirmed the conclusions of both Dahl (1961) and Bachrach and Baratz (1970), to which I have made reference in Chapter 2. However, those groups who had tasted the fruit of influence did not wish to see this evaporate through Elected Members making decisions which were not in accord with the views of the Partnership.

Members and officers had a range of understandings which provided the basis for joint action, consequently difficulties in relations were normally implicit and subterranean, only occasionally rising to the surface when there

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<sup>8</sup> The Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership.

were issues or events of particular significance (Lacey 1977 cited in Ball 1987 p. 20). One issue caused overt tension during the early stages of the preparations for the SEN Action Plan. A senior Councillor in the majority party heard that officers were proposing total inclusion for children with special educational needs; she demonstrated her direct influence by making it clear that this was not in accord with the LEA policy of parental choice for their children's schooling:

the debate was always bouncing between how one could capture ideas best...rather than grand fundamentals...there were probably degrees of tension around the extent to which inclusion in mainstream schools was beneficial (O2).

This exchange of views illustrated that 'the personal [was] political' and 'the political [was] personal' (Ball 1987 p. 216); it was one of those rare occasions when 'the façade [was] broken and the messy, confused underlife, the tendons of power, the veins of influence, [were] exposed to view' (Ball 1987 p. 244). Thus policy intentions contained:

ambiguities, contradictions and omissions that provide[d] particular opportunities for parties to the "implementation" process, what we term "space" for manoeuvre (Bowe *et al.* 1992 pp. 13-14).

Together with Cibulka (1996 p. 107), I have noted that ambiguities inherent in policies had to be worked out. A manager for special educational needs reported that after much debate Members and officers 'wrestled around and managed to get the word "choice" in the sentence that reflected, in fact, actual preference' (O2). The Members and officers were able to identify their differences quite clearly and although agreement had been reached over the matter of parental choice, one officer was not sure that the circle had been squared (O2).

It was evident that some of the representatives on the SEN Panel preparing the Plan interpreted language in different ways according to their views and backgrounds; consequently there was a degree of confusion; a general conclusion drawn by Riches (1997 p. 170). Indeed it had not been possible to assume that the participants in the process were motivated by the same factors and had the same view of the overall position even if they agreed with

the proposals for action. Meanings were not 'negotiated between equals but differently resourced agents operating in differently arranged settings' (Scott 1994 p. 46). The process for agreeing the detail of the SEN Action Plan was also an example of how Members could make a relatively cautious accommodation to ensure that the text expressed their political ideas; 'getting everyone to sign up to all the wording was quite difficult to do' (O4). Such decision-making was an illustration of the micropolitical process involving confrontation, negotiation and compromise.

Once the Members determined that each child's educational provision should be considered on an individual basis, a better understanding between Members and some officers was established. It was not surprising that disagreement or confrontation might arise in some discussions and decision-making, a conclusion drawn by McCalla-Chen (2000, cited in McCalla 2002 p. 42). One Councillor also felt that some officers were of the opinion that Councillors 'were interfering in things that we shouldn't be' (C1). She was clear that:

officers have got to understand that at the end of the day the whole of the [Council] is run on a political set up and there may be different views within those groups and there definitely are. But at the end of the day it will be Members that make the decisions and you are accountable as a last resort most definitely not only to our electorate but to the MPs that jump up and down as well (C1).

In such circumstances the same Councillor indicated that:

it was essential to get everything out on the table. I do tend to bring things out in the open at meetings with officers and explain exactly what my thinking is (C1).

This comment demonstrated that Members and officers brought a wide variety of expectations to the task of preparing the respective Plans. In this particular instance the Chairman used her status to reinforce her expectations and her contributions to the debate. In the subsequent discussions, Members and officers clarified the boundaries for debate; that is, who should be consulted and by implication what could be considered as co-operation. I would also suggest it was illustrative of benign power where



good working relationships between Members and officers were not severed by disagreement.

The preparation of the SEN Action Plan was also an example of the way in which Members exercised their influence over the detail and demonstrated the interplay of micropolitics within a politically charged setting. Councillors often gave careful consideration to the detailed text of the final Plans although it is important to note that Elected Members did not exercise the same detailed oversight of the Plans other than the SEN Action Plan that have formed the basis of this research. In the case of the SEN Action Plan they took an interest in whether there should be targets for the reduction in the special school population or whether there should be predictions. Such interest led on one occasion to Members breaking with their previous consensual approach with officers to policy development. In one of their meetings held in private to discuss the draft SEN Plan, 'Councillors disputed every single bullet point and word in the paper produced by officers' (O4). In order to resolve the impasse officers 'worked with just one representative from each of the parties to finalise the Plan' (O4). The upshot was that officers felt some frustration as protracted negotiations were required to resolve all the difficulties and misunderstandings. Overall, however, within the settlement: '[c]ontesting and reconstructing the framework was not a major agenda item' (Seddon 1989 p. 18 cited in Taylor *et al.* 1997).

When the Education Committee considered the SEN Action Plan, the major work having been completed, there were only formal speeches with little of significance to debate and only recommendations to resolve. This became one of the official 'moments' of committees and meetings, having 'only a symbolic role; [it] elaborated an ideology of participation and collective affirmation' (Ball 1987 p. 237). Thus once the LEA had agreed a policy, generally party political debate ceased.

The last Chairman of the Education Committee felt that she had a direct influence on the development of a range of policies in the LEA, mainly

associated with the SEN Action Plan (C1)<sup>9</sup>; undoubtedly some of this arose from her personal preferences. In the process for preparing the SEN Action Plan, she used her political acumen for having 'taken on board the worries that parents had' (C1) she specifically requested that officers undertake feasibility work to develop proposals in the SEN Action Plan for changes to the admission arrangements of some special schools. Her request demonstrated that the players involved in the policy process were active on several levels. As a consequence the surface democratic processes could be distorted by the ways in which social actors involved in delivering change, sought to shape that change in order to make the outcomes congruent with their individual interests. It was also a clear demonstration that this Councillor was prepared to exercise influence over some officers who she thought had proposed sweeping changes to special schools without being sufficiently flexible and who had not fully considered the implications of their schemes on the respective interest groups. The different perspectives between some of the Members and officers on the elements of change and the associated exercise of power were an example of:

a perennial feature of organisations, always present in crevices and crannies just below the surface, bubbling up occasionally as disputes in certain places, and enacted in accord with particular conventions and rules (Kolb and Bartunek 1992 p. 10).

The Member process for agreeing the SEN Action Plan was illustrative of the conclusion that most human decision-making was concerned with 'bounded rationality' (Ham and Hill 1993 p. 84) or the discovery or selection of satisfactory alternatives, 'satisficing' (March and Simon 1958). There were also elements here of the ambiguity which were a feature of the 'garbage can' approach to decision-making (Cohen *et al.* 1972). Quite often decision-making focused on the surface aspects of choices, however, they did take into account the structural and historical conditions of the LEA as expressed by, and encapsulated in, its representatives. Certain values and rules were taken for granted and became background assumptions which orientated

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<sup>9</sup> However, even a senior Councillor and Chairman of the Education Committee was not able to make changes rapidly: she recounted that one particular policy proposal relating to gifted and talented children that she had been promoting took five years to come to fruition.

participants towards particular definitions of problems and ways of “thinking”, a conclusion drawn also by Popkewitz (1984 pp. 173-4).

This section has brought together a number of themes associated with micropolitical activity that were discussed in Chapter 2. For instance there was evidence of the first face of power as Members as an elite exercised their influence over the planning process and their concerns over their potential loss of influence when they were expected to share power through partnership arrangements with stakeholders. The data also indicated that power could be exercised through language, for instance in some of the detailed wording in the SEN Action Plan and the discussion surrounding this. I have already proposed that the decision-making process of Elected Members owed much to the preparatory work of officers and it is to their activities I now wish to turn my attention.

### **The key points where officers exercised influence**

#### *General context in which officers were contributing to the process for producing the Plans*

Not surprisingly given the large size of the LEA which I outlined in Chapter 1, there was a broad spectrum of views expressed on all aspects of education policy and practice, including what might be considered as the most appropriate role for the LEA. Indeed whatever Plan was being considered there was often a wide range of contradictory demands and expectations from stakeholders. It is important to mention in this context that headteachers and governors were vocal on a range of matters and their interaction with the LEA required sensitive management. In such an environment, officers sought to influence the direction of the policy process by seeking, wherever possible, to achieve consensus during the preparation of the Plans without compromising the overall direction of the policy thrust they wished to pursue, as noted by Beckhard and Pritchard (1992 cited in Trowler 1998 p. 71). This was also in accord with the views of Reay who has indicated that:

Part of the discursive work of the new managerialism is to subsume conflict under a veneer of pragmatic rationality, consensus seeking and team building (Reay 1998 p. 187).

All of the interviewees recognised that officers had a key role to play in formulating the detail of the Plans and managing the process. Lipsky (1980) has written of the importance of public sector professionals and has also pointed to the limitations on professional power, as well as the constraints and often contradictory demands which these professionals sought to resolve.

I have already indicated some of the tensions between Members and officers; however, the outcomes of micropolitical activity were not always in favour of Members. Officers clearly felt that they had an important influence over the views of Members in terms of the briefing that was provided. Another aspect of this influence of officers was identified by comments of a Member who reported that when a particular party had a majority:

officers would naturally prepare their policies or interpret them, put a flavour on them, which they feel appeals to the group currently in power...There was a view that Members couldn't really be influenced at all and that the officers meeting together decided what should be done and put it in a sweet way to Members who just suck up to it and that was the end of it (C3).

Micropolitical activity was not restricted just to the production of the Plans; these features continued through the cultural change which the Plans brought with them. For instance LEA managers and special school headteachers began to work to consider the 'formulation of the new style of special school' (O2). Officers described how they had been particularly active in these discussions (O2) to drive forward the agenda. Interestingly the special school headteacher highlighted that in these discussions, officers were having to 'acknowledge the implications [of their proposals] for other client groups' and as a result adapt and change (H1).

This was an important comment for it demonstrated again that the policy process did not have a cut-off point, and was not fixed (Ball 1990b p. 185). Rather it was in a state of constant interpretation, negotiation and change in

a number of sites where the opportunities for micropolitical activity continued. The policy process 'should thus be viewed as text and discourse – it is multi-dimensional in character' (Trowler 1998 p. 86).

*Aspirations of officers to shape the agenda and the content of the Plans*

My data provides significant evidence that the actions of officers were influenced by their aspirations for the education service. An example can be seen in the actions taken by officers seeking the inclusion into mainstream schools of those children with special educational needs and those children who were disaffected. A headteacher noted that in the context of the Behaviour Support Plan, some officers were 'almost evangelical' (H2) in their commitment to social inclusion and 'were not open minded enough to see the difficulties from the schools' end' (H2). The headteacher subsequently acknowledged, however, that these same officers had become more even-handed in their judgements following discussions with senior managers in schools (H2) – a recognition that those who were single minded in their approach could change their views as a result of rational discussion and consultation. In general, disagreement was likely to occur when the interests and values of the various agents were dissimilar such as when radical positions were being considered amid conservative approaches to an issue and vice versa, a conclusion drawn by Mason (1993, cited in McCalla 2002 p. 42).

One officer could have been said to have demonstrated benign power for the benefit of the greater number by taking the high risk strategy of seeking 'to proselytise' (O2) the message of inclusion amongst his colleague officers:

we have to inculcate our staff with an inclusion viewpoint trying to work closely with schools, in collaboration with schools, to solve problems at source rather than by moving children out of those contexts (O2).

However, he recognised that his values were constrained by a need to ensure 'that you don't press a line...that takes you beyond the Authority's policy' (O2). Thus the officers' principles and views on the nature and purpose of education interacted with their respective lines of accountability

and as a consequence influenced their contributions to the policy process, a factor noted by Kogan (1986 p. 16). Yet within such a framework of accountability officers were able to exercise discretion (Simon 1957 cited in Ham and Hill 1993 p. 154). The senior officer for SEN was not alone in his commitment to inclusion, although others did not express their views quite so fervently. The officer involved in early years for instance, indicated she had exercised her influence through the Partnership which had 'taken up that cause [inclusion] with rigour in a way that other Partnerships haven't yet and we have been praised for that'<sup>10</sup> (O2).

Overall these officers were in the vanguard at LEA level setting out a complex and ambitious policy agenda. They were either involved directly or kept in touch with those on the ground, including the key Member panels and committees and other groups of players whose interests often pulled in different directions. These officers crafted the policies into a particular shape to fit local circumstances and ambitions, as noted by Taylor *et al.* (1997 p. 7). This influence exercised by officers was multifaceted, and was exercised both overtly and subtly through the policy process and in sophisticated ways to achieve control.

Officers could exercise their influence in subtle ways. For instance, during the production of the EDP, officers realised that there needed to be a major shift in thinking 'from the concept of entitlement to the concept of differentiation' (O1) in terms of the LEA support provided to schools<sup>11</sup>. Although it was not stated in those terms, there was certainly a recognition that a much more 'sophisticated' approach to equity was required to provide additional resources to those schools with the greatest challenges in communities with the greatest need (O1). The support arrangements required a delicate touch to educate and persuade school managers of the reasonableness of the approach. Commitment and determination on the part

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<sup>10</sup> By the DfEE

<sup>11</sup> This was in accord with the Code of Practice on LEA-School Relations (DfEE 1999).

of officers were required to see through changes which were felt to be correct. This demonstrated both that values were constantly shifting, a feature noted by Marshall (2000 p. 127) and that change was multidimensional, as noted by Fullan (1991 p. 37).

In the next chapter I will examine the way in which there was a positive attitude between a number of stakeholder representatives and officers in drafting the contents of some Plans. However, officers were also able to exercise subtle influence as they used some of the Plans to:

provide an umbrella for what on the face of it could be a range of disparate activities. To some extent some of that was retrospective coherence; we legitimised what we were doing by a process of producing the Plan (O1).

In essence this meant that the respective contributions of schools, governors and the LEA were legitimised in the actions and activities that supported the key objectives of raising pupil achievement, school improvement and increasing social inclusion. In some ways the SEN Action Plan also became an instrument by which the actions of individual officers could be justified. The SEN Action Plan was used as a touchstone or reference text and contributed to a particular discourse:

from time to time they [schools] say, "It's in the Action Plan", so they refer back. It is a really powerful document; it is influencing us a lot (O4).

The common feature of all the Plans was the key role officers had in establishing a strategic overview of the actions that would be necessary to support their overall aims (H1). Officers, therefore:

draw together the vision, the statements etc. that people can then discuss and consult on...about what the consensus is...and draw together what can work (O4).

There was an expectation that officers should 'be sensitive to what was going on' (H3). An important facet of this was how officers devised strategies to defuse tension and its associated potential difficulties. For instance the officer involved in early years recognised that she was good at working to achieve consensus and seeing all points of view, a feature of micropolitics noted by Blase (1991 pp. 1-2). In part this was due to her breadth of

experience and the way in which she orchestrated the Partnership by setting boundaries in which the representatives could work.

An officer involved with SEN indicated that in consultation meetings she had to be both subtle and proactive:

we had to be careful not to stand up with a too heavy agenda that would worry people, but actually lay out the government's agenda and then focus a debate (O4).

She recognised that officers:

had to listen to people's anxieties around the consequences of moving too fast on an agenda...of inclusion for children with special needs in mainstream schools (O4).

This approach was also demonstrated as she kept her view on her ultimate goal of social inclusion whilst being prepared to be flexible to achieve her ends. She had to:

listen to all the different parties....I have sometimes had an idea; I would be quite prepared to wobble on that and almost seem to backtrack sometimes in order to actually work with something even though I am keeping my eye along the way I am hoping to go. So I do sometimes take a pragmatic view on how to get to a goal (O4).

These examples demonstrate how inequalities of the respective representatives could be reduced whilst promoting greater involvement of these representatives in decision-making, either on behalf of others or as individuals engaged in making decisions, a feature identified by McCalla (2002 p. 49).

The influence of officers can be found in the way in which the Early Years Development and Childcare Plan was prepared. In this case, officers sought to use their influence to achieve 'choice and diversity' by bringing 'the strengths of every single part of that sector<sup>12</sup> into the equation' (O3). In this process there was a commitment to:

hold difference and hold consensus around difference, in a meaningful way that is positive so that people are not scrapping over children (O3).

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<sup>12</sup> i.e. private, voluntary and maintained



The final decisions in this Plan represented some kind of balance of individual interests which had been settled by mutual consent and where the respective parties had a share in the actual decision-making. It also demonstrated that policy making was largely achieved in tentative and incremental steps, influenced through pluralist bargaining and compromises amongst diverse interests and multiple agendas (Ball 1994a p. 16; Cibulka 1996 p. 114).

The early years officer also explained that although the representatives within the Partnership established the value base and aspirations, it was her role 'to translate them into concrete strategies' (O3). She also indicated how the agenda of the Partnership could be manipulated. Knowing the limits of her activity she suggested how other groups could take forward certain agenda items outside the official partnership arrangements (O3). In these circumstances there was a reliance on notions of exchange or on bilateral transactions for the purposes of mutual self-interest.

She also recognised that she contributed to a 'benign autocracy' and as such 'shape[d] the agenda you want and then get people to go with you' (O3) and was determined to 'shift the focus more to actually having the agenda arise from the partnership' (O3), a feature of 'agreement making' identified by Nixon *et al.* (1997 p. 16). She candidly acknowledged the influence she brought to bear on decision-making. Although she presented the pros and cons of two options she:

probably gave the argument [for one of the options] more powerfully and that is the way the Partnership went. I still feel it was a fair and open thing that what I was doing was informing them (O3).

In the discussions relating to the SEN Action Plan, some Councillors were aware that officers perhaps were safeguarding their (officers) own position by not always providing parents with sufficient information or examples of good practice to enable the parents to come to an informed decision. As a result the parents' support group met with two senior Members privately to discuss the SEN Action Plan. The parents expressed their concern that officers were

filtering the views of parents before they reached Members<sup>13</sup>. However, the outcome of this meeting with parents was far from clear as the parents were not sure 'whether the Members actually took on board the strength of feeling' (P1) the parents had expressed.

The range of strategies used by officers suggests that they could influence the flow of information and, as one Member felt, officers demonstrated that 'professionals think they know best' (C2), a factor recognised by Elcock (1982 p. 96). Anderson (1991 p. 122) has noted a similar point in relation to schools where principals sometimes manipulated the information flow and 'manage[d] the meanings' ascribed to actions. Scribner *et al.* (1994 p. 204) have also indicated that elite policy makers are most likely to achieve their goals as they are able to control information.

The early years manager also exercised the authority which came from her position in the Partnership:

I think it is understood ultimately I would have to be the one that would veto things and ...say, "Well I can't take that away" (O3).

For instance when she anticipated there might be some tension over the priorities for expanding provision, a group of representatives from the Partnership was asked 'to come up with a view about how we should take this forward' (O3). Such bargaining and dealing between agencies in order to achieve policy implementation has also been noted by Hill (1980 p. 106).

The complexity of the role of the early years manager raised a number of questions: there were indications that she saw the representatives as merely being 'co-opted' rather than 'empowered' in decision-making, a factor noted by Weiss (1993 p. 83) involving teachers in schools. At other times, however, she sought to provide opportunities for the representatives to exercise influence. Consistently she saw herself as part of the process of agenda setting and decision-making as well as being a facilitator. She concluded that she had a dual role for she was one of the members of the

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<sup>13</sup> One of the managers for special educational needs also acknowledged that officers and Members were being approached by different groups of parents/adults.

Partnership whilst at the same time she felt she had to be detached in order to manage the direction of the Partnership – encapsulated in her comment that she was ‘of the Partnership and not of it’ (O3).

Officers inevitably had discretion in order to cope with uncertainty; as a result the policy process tended to evolve through the interactions of the multiplicity of participants with whom officers had to deal. Holding together a range of aspirations and multiple agendas was not always easy to achieve, a point noted by Paechter (1995 p. 45), however, my data indicates that officers were aware of these complexities.

### *Management and control of the process*

My research suggests that a number of the most senior officers had an interest in achieving certain outcomes associated with the objectives in their performance management schemes. These senior managers had enough access to the levers of power to deliver change to meet their own agendas – a point noted by Welsh and Frost (2000 p. 231). Three examples illustrate the commitment of officers to achieving their personal aims.

First, the Director of Learning Services used the status of his position to take forward locally the national agenda for the inclusion of children with special educational needs into mainstream schools; this was particularly important as he was a member of the National Advisory Group for Special Educational Needs. Second, the Head of the SEN Service explained that the status quo was not an option which could be included in the SEN Action Plan; this statement set the framework for the development of the Plan. At the outset, therefore, officers were able to take advantage of the space between planning and outcomes, as noted by Ozga (2000 p.10). Both the Director and the Head of Service were innovators and committed to change. This was an instance of where the ‘producers of politics contribute[d] to the creation of the agenda’ and decided what the choices were whilst the consumers of politics only had a limited range of options from which to

choose or reject (Gewirtz 2002 p. 181). Third, a senior officer indicated that one of his key roles was:

to command leadership in relation to the culture of the education service; the test of that leadership was the extent to which people go along with it (O1).

The SEN officer demonstrated the mixed motives which underpinned the way she could exercise influence. She explained that in preparing the SEN Action Plan she had to meet the requirements of her managers whilst at the same time ultimately seeking to do the best for the children with special educational needs and their parents (O4). Although there might not be a significant difference in these expectations, her comments were illustrative of both the contractual accountability associated with the outcomes expected of her and the responsive accountability (Halstead 1994 p. 149) arising from her involvement and interaction with those affected by the decisions.

Officers controlled different 'spheres of influence' or decision zones, each of which was characterised by relative degrees of power, autonomy, and differential discretion over decision-making – features noted also in schools studied by Hanson (1976 p. 37). These spheres of influence included setting agendas, preparing written documentation and subsequent discussions associated with it, and the routine activities of presenting information through the committee process. I will return to the drafting of reports in the next section as it could be considered a joint activity between Members and officers. At this point I wish to indicate that the results of this drafting were sometimes less than transparent as indicated in the SEN Action Plan:

one colleague was very clever in making sure that through the document what we wanted was not exactly hidden but was embedded into it...you have got to look hard to really work out the consequences of our raft of proposals and actions because they just lead to a consequence perhaps at some point down the line (O4).

The influence of officers in the process of preparing the Plans was identified by the special school headteacher who thought that the SEN Action Plan:

had more or less been written prior to consultation because a lot of things that have finally arrived at in the substantive

document, I was party to discussing two years previously, before formal consultation took place (H1).

Further, a parent who thought that no one during the consultations had contributed to the final outcome (P2) reinforced the views of the special school headteacher. To some parents the processes of consultation and participation were 'shot through with strains of forced compliance' (Reay 1998 p. 186). However, in one sense the agendas for both the SEN Action Plan and the EDP had been considered by officers for some time as these were part of the national agenda which most LEAs had been discussing. In this respect the special school headteacher acknowledged that 'there had been quite a bit of collaborative work in advance of the EDP' (H1).

These examples demonstrate the potential for the exercise of considerable power by officers, although there are indications that this could be benign evidenced by the way in which officers had been seeking to use their influence to engage headteachers and governors in the developing national and local agendas.

From this assessment it was evident that the power of officers complemented that exercised by Members. The time that officers could devote to planning their approach to the policy process and their technical knowledge were key factors in the way they exercised influence. In the next section I will explore the joint influence of these groups of LEA representatives.

### **The key points where Elected Members and officers jointly exercised influence**

My data indicates that Members and officers generally managed their interrelated interests and uncertainties through strategies by which the boundaries of their roles, practices and control were maintained; a conclusion also drawn by Malen (1994 p. 157).

Many of the changing patterns of control exercised by Members and officers emerged as a result of the complex interaction between them – as one senior

Member acknowledged it would be naïve to say that 'officers do the administration and the Members prepare the policy' (C3). Although it was suggested Members should have had an interest in the strategy, it was acknowledged that they did not always have an awareness of the practical implications of specific proposals (T1). A governor provided another and more critical perspective, as he felt that 'Elected Members have had great difficulty in understanding change [since 1988] and inevitably local authority officers as well!' (G2)

In terms of their interactions, officers recognised that Members needed to trust what they, the officers, were undertaking. Overall strong working relationships between Members and officers were forged during the process of preparing Plans as proposals were discussed and 'struggled with' (O4) and were useful to achieving successful outcomes. Discussions with Members were mostly carried out in the political settings of panels and committees; panels meeting in private particularly often took on the atmosphere and the dynamics of a relatively informal group, as identified by Adair (1986 p. 26) and Jaques (1984). As such, these groups required a different order of interpersonal skills compared to the 'negotiated order' (Strauss 1978 cited in Ball 1987 p. 20) of a more formal committee.

I mentioned in the previous section that producing committee items was a co-operative exercise between Members and officers. After some discussion with Members, officer reports or drafts of Plans were prepared and normally presented to Members to consider. The papers for instance associated with the SEN Action Plan were discussed in private with the respective Member panel including the spokespersons of the political groups. Generally one officer would take the lead in preparing a draft of a particular Plan; there is evidence from the interviewees that this was the case for each of the Plans and 'there would be some sort of debate' (O2) to try to encapsulate the intentions of Members. The SEN Action Plan provided an example of the key role officers had in writing a Plan:

we had to identify the strands that we were working with, the actions we were taking...and then we took that to Members (O4).

Although the content of the Plans was important, the way in which the Plans were publicised was also very significant. The launch of the SEN Action Plan was 'symbolic' (O4). Members of the Council, governors, headteachers, parents and a representative from the DfEE were all at the launch; even the parent who had expressed her opposition was present! Although there were still different perceptions about the contents of the Plan, its publication marked a milestone. From the point of view of the officers there was an obvious sense of achievement if not relief, illustrated by the following comment:

It was our Plan after all that we have been through...What we have got is a process and also a statement...[of] underlying principles which we have all signed up to now (O4).

I would suggest that this officer's comment demonstrated both an emotional and an objective response to the completion of the Plan, both of which were real. In contrast was the concern felt by some parents who had opposed the proposals in the Plan. Both of these responses to change have been identified by Walton (1997 cited in Morrison 1998 p. 136).

As the content of the SEN Action Plan was potentially more contentious it was drafted and finalised in private meetings of Members and officers whilst the EDP was formulated more openly in conjunction with stakeholders. These different approaches might be explained by the subject matter which was under consideration. The seemingly more controversial discussion associated with the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools might be managed more effectively in private whilst the discussion associated with raising pupil achievement would be considered more openly.

The power of Members *vis-à-vis* officers was demonstrated as the former sought to control agendas in order to manage the flow of information, minimise outside influence and avoid contentious matters which could

threaten their control of the process (Malen 1994 p. 147 cf. the second face of power identified by Bachrach and Baratz 1970). Such matters were not value neutral; what was at stake was whether Members and officers could control the process and content of the respective Plans and whether their vision would prevail, a general conclusion noted by Scribner *et al.* (1994 p. 206) and by Blase (1991 pp. 1-2) in relation to the implementation of policy in schools. The Members and officers were in the main successful in their approach for, although fewer in number than the representatives in interest groups, they were active in as many arenas as possible and were in positions of power and influence.

## **Conclusion**

A number of important themes, particularly centring on the way in which Elected Members and officers interacted, have come through the data analysis in this chapter. I wish to put this theme in the wider context by commenting first on the policy context set by central government.

Although LEA representatives might disagree with the content of central government policy there were limited opportunities to alter fundamentally the direction of agreed policy. In part this could be explained by Elected Members and officers being charged with taking actions in accordance with statute. Thus those in a leadership role were not able in any significant respect, in comparison with the local actors in the research of Deem and Davies (1991 p. 154) to influence 'the direction of policy irrespective of the intentions of the legislators and those in central government'.

It was clear, however, that central government provided the opportunity for each LEA to ground its Plans within its local context. In many respects this opportunity was circumscribed because much of this context related to marshalling data to support the particular activities associated with the national priorities set by central government. I acknowledge, however, that there were opportunities to include local priorities and actions in the Plans



and in this respect officers sought to incorporate existing practice and to point to developments which were ongoing within the LEA.

My research provides evidence for the way in which Members emphasised the key role they had in taking decisions. All stakeholders recognised that Members were ultimately democratically accountable for their (Members) decisions. Consequently there were limits to the power of Members both in terms of what might be acceptable to the electorate and their respective political parties, and what might be possible in relation to legislation, advice and the views of those being consulted. However, in terms of exercising power in relation to the detail of the Plans, Members were cushioned as they were able to take some of the more contentious decisions in private meetings.

It was clear that the Members and officers, along with the other participants contributing to the context of the policy process, were not immune from external questions about their educational principles. Officers in particular, found it difficult to propose something which was not in accord with the 'culture and the way we do things round here' (O1), that is the informal norms based on shared meanings, understandings and values. This was no easy matter, for on occasions the culture was being set within the different and competing value systems, a point noted by Morgan (1986 p. 127), as the Plans were being developed. However, my research has demonstrated that some officers were strategically placed as 'policy entrepreneurs' to seize the opportunity provided by the 'policy windows', to 'hook solutions to problems' and 'proposals to political momentum' (Kingdon 1984 p. 191).

Officers took the lead in interpreting the primary and secondary legislation and in particular the advice provided by central government. Thus officers were in important positions as they mediated the requirements of central government to Elected Members, to headteachers and to other stakeholders. Because the Plans had the weight of central government requirements behind them, the existing good practice in the LEA and its underlying principles which were incorporated into the Plans were given further weight.

In addition, officers were able to identify areas of policy development which they considered would be of benefit to the education service and sought to incorporate these into the Plans and by so doing these developments were given credibility.

Having set out ambitious agendas for the implementation of policy, officers helped Members to understand the implications of the policy process. These agendas had a greater likelihood of being achieved if key Elected Members were convinced of the arguments in their favour. In this respect officers in particular had much in common with Lipsky's (1980) 'street level bureaucrats', who in the light of the myriad of factors in the local context and their detailed knowledge, helped to manage and adapt the policies of central government. In fulfilling their roles, officers were influenced by their own backgrounds and principles as well as their frustrations, and their relations with colleagues and other participants – a conclusion drawn also by Blase and Anderson (1995 p. vii) in relation to teachers.

It is also clear that officers had a significant degree of freedom in preparing the detailed content of the drafts of the Plans. This was consistent with my previous research which included a discussion of the production of the first School Organisation Plan of the LEA (Durrant 2000). Elected Members reserved most of their attention to those Plans where they still felt they had some direct influence over how the detailed proposals in the Plans were to be implemented e.g. the SEN Action Plan. They also picked up points of principle and used their status to demonstrate this influence. Members and officers, therefore, recognised that a degree of pragmatism was required in order to achieve their overall aims of developing robust Plans which could provide the necessary strategic direction and leadership required by the education service (C3, O1). It is also important to recall that Elected Members worked in settings which were private and relatively informal where they could consider the necessary detail of the Plan with officers.

Not unexpectedly there was evidence of a particular unity of purpose amongst officers. In terms of the officer dimension, my research indicates

that power was mainly embedded in the work process itself and was thus quite subtle. In some respects power was being exercised through the 'normalisation' of bureaucratic control and was focused on developing individuals with particular traits. Quicke (2000) summarises this by indicating that power:

operates through 'discipline' which involves the replacement of legal principles with the principles of physical, psychological and moral normality. The operation of 'disciplinary power' gives rise to a new kind of bureaucracy, albeit one rooted in the same form of rationality, instrumental rationality (p. 309).

The interrelationship of Members and officers was critical to the refinement of central government policies. These representatives were able to achieve their overall purposes because they managed the process to produce the Plans, they understood the requirements of central government and they took the final decisions on the content of the Plans.

Having looked in detail at the micropolitical activity of Members and officers, I now wish to discuss how other voices in the policy process were managed in both private and public settings.

## **CHAPTER 5 'MANAGING' THE VOICES OF THE PARTICIPANTS IN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SETTINGS**

The representatives of the LEA not only shaped policy, they also 'managed' the messages coming from the voices of stakeholders as they made their contributions to the policy process. I wish to explore issues around consultations and the perceptions of those involved in the consultation process, as it was in this area of activity especially that the LEA representatives exercised the forms of power and influence as summarised in Chapter 2 in the review of the literature.

Micropolitical activity will be examined:

### *In private settings*

- i) setting the agenda for the consultation process; and
- ii) in private meetings;

### *In public settings*

- i) the management of public consultation meetings;
- ii) filtering the responses from the consultations and selecting the content of the Plans; and
- iii) the perception that the professionals were authoritative.

As Elected Members and officers were closely involved in these activities there is of necessity a degree of overlap between this and the previous chapter devoted to the analysis of the data.

## **Private settings**

### *Setting the agenda for consultations*

My research suggests that through setting the parameters for the policy process, in particular the agendas for specific consultation meetings, Members and officers could exercise their influence. Officers recognised that in order for a Plan to have any chance of succeeding it was necessary:

to have the main stakeholders on board and at least address some of the difficulties and objections that they perhaps wouldn't see absolutely eye to eye (O2).

This view implied that a judgement had to be made about where the locus of power was located, a factor noted by Morrison (1998 p. 16), and the legitimacy and the weight that the views of key stakeholders might have in ensuring the passage of a particular Plan. For instance, in recognition of the direct influence that they could exert on the SEN Action Plan, there was a great deal of activity centring on Councillors to ensure that they 'were on board from the earliest time' (O2).

Members noted that the arrangements for the preparation of the Plans did not always go smoothly; the process needed careful management to enable Members and officers to be in control, a feature explored at some length by Hoyle (1986 p. 76) in relation to schools. One Councillor acknowledged the importance of this when she noted that during the first stage in the consultations on the SEN Action Plan 'all hell broke loose' (C1).

As LEAs are an integral part of a larger political environment they are not closed units; indeed LEAs, like other public bodies, have been encouraged by central government to interact with their environments through consultations and negotiations with stakeholders. Nevertheless this was not straightforward, for as Stout *et al.* (1994 p. 13) have indicated in the context of the influence over school policy, issues over who should contribute to decisions and therefore who could ultimately influence the outcome of the policy process, were decided at the outset by the values held by those managing the process. The key matter, therefore, was who was to decide how that consultation was to take place. Through the process of monitoring and controlling those who could contribute to the preparation of the Plans, LEA representatives were able to build up considerable power. Further evidence for their use of power could also be found as interested individuals and groups who were outside the LEA were identified and invited to contribute to the consultation process. Challenges could arise at the margins where counter narratives emerged outside the LEA:

From discourse among the challengers emerge the coalitions that articulate demands and gather momentum and power. Neglecting the politics from the margin is neglecting one half of the politics (Marshall 2000 p. 150).

The way in which communication was managed was a fertile ground for micropolitical activity and the demonstration of power and influence. The director of a parents' support group indicated that Members and officers were not always prepared to 'share agendas; you have got to meet so that people can understand why you need to be taking that particular standpoint' (P1). Thus some consultation meetings did not demonstrate the collective participation by which, in part, some commentators e.g. Benhabib (1996 p. 74) and Yeatman (1994 p. 110 cited in Vincent and Martin 2000) have suggested everyday life can be democratised: 'Rather they appear[ed] simply as sites for the consolidation of self-interest' (Vincent and Martin 2000 p. 473). In framing problems and defining issues in advance of consultation, most of the officers acted in such a way as to control the decision-making process, a conclusion that Paechter (1995 p. 48) noted in her research in relation to managers in schools. Such activity could be seen as evidence of management practice for it was easier to present a partly formulated problem than to describe a situation and ask people to pose for themselves the solution arising out of it. However, by providing participants with decisions on options that had been defined in advance there was less likelihood that the participants would go beyond the parameters which had been set. There was, therefore, a 'rhetorical justification' of publicly acceptable reasons for moving in a certain direction (Sparkes 1987 pp. 42-3). This too was also a feature of agenda setting.

There was a fine line between the way in which effective communications were managed between officers and stakeholders and seeking to limit further debate with stakeholders. The process for finalising the EDP illustrated this point. Officers decided to extract the key messages from the final draft of the EDP and check with stakeholders that these reflected and encapsulated the previous insights that had been gained. Officers did not provide, however, the detail of the final draft of the Plan to enable stakeholders to suggest

further views. The intention, as reported by officers, was to make the process manageable rather than deny stakeholders a further opportunity to comment on the detail of the EDP (O1). It was also clear that a significant amount of the content of the EDP was not subject to detailed democratic scrutiny because it had been decided away from any public arena. Although the Advisory Group contributed to the shape of the EDP most of the detailed drafting was completed by 'skilled managers' (Welsh and Frost 2000 p. 234). It should be noted, however, that the full Council was required to consider and approve the EDP.

With regard to the SEN Action Plan, part of the purpose of consultation was a conscious decision to 'find a fairly pragmatic [course of action] that [would] not alienate most people' (O2). The control exercised by Councillors and officers to achieve some form of consensus may not necessarily have been negative, and in McCalla's (2002) framework could be considered as 'benign', for clearly business had to be managed for the benefit of the majority. However, this may have been confusing to those who were being consulted. In the consultations there was some information giving although the subsequent discussion was not restricted to these matters. In relation to information gathering and debate those who were being consulted were probably unaware of what had been omitted from the consultation agenda and therefore outside the decision-making arena (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). The agenda for the SEN Action Plan, like all others, encapsulated the intentions, hopes and objectives of Members and officers. The progress towards achieving the objectives was mediated and transformed by the agendas of those involved in the planning process, although in turn they could be modified by the participants' perceptions of the matters identified for discussion.

In summary officers were the main innovators and set the tone for most, if not all, subsequent work associated with producing the Plans. Largely it was their views that were used as the benchmark by which to assess the responses of those who were consulted and whether co-operation was likely.

### *Micropolitical activity in private meetings*

My data has shown that meetings which were held in private provided the opportunities for micropolitical activity as the interactions of Members and officers were not open to the public gaze. I have already illustrated how a great deal of the preparatory work for the consultations and subsequently writing the Plans was undertaken when Councillors and officers met in private.

Such meetings were opportunities to improve the understanding of both Councillors and officers and 'through active debate these things [e.g. inclusion] were clarified' (C1). Frank discussion could take place which in turn could influence actions. On occasions in these private meetings, some initial assumptions were made about certain shared definitions. These views were subject to continual review as groups strove to produce alternative sets of views and goals. I have already indicated how misunderstandings had to be resolved when the disparities in unstated meanings regarding parental choice and inclusion became evident to all concerned. Meetings in private also enabled Members and officers to be clear about what constituted the essential elements of their roles.

Members acknowledged that there could be difficulties at public meetings in 'saying exactly what you are thinking...I would prefer to discuss [these] outside the meeting' (C1). Thus Members sought to use this protective political tactic to deal with controversial topics and differences in emphasis and in values that arose in meetings; similar tactics used by teachers to deal with controversial topics in classrooms have been noted by Blase and Anderson (1995 p. 55).

Bailey (1977 cited in Welsh and Frost 2000 p. 222) has described an interesting analogy using the theatre stage, indicating that professional roles, and their attendant issues, could be said to be debated on the front stage, while personal circumstances could be resolved privately, using the off stage arena. My data, however, would suggest that a significant amount of the



detail in relation to the preparation of the Plans was discussed privately using the off stage arena. Even those matters which were to be discussed publicly on the front stage had been often determined in private off stage. Therefore, the off stage arena was used not only to resolve personal issues but also to determine which issues should be kept out of the public domain.

The analysis of the data in this section supports both Dahl's (1961) view that power was exercised where decisions were made or with decision-makers, and the conclusions drawn by Bachrach and Baratz (1970) in relation to the exercise of power through the preparation of agendas which defined the matters for decision-making. Micropolitical activity was particularly evident in private meetings – they were important moments as they enabled Members and officers to exercise direct influence in determining the parameters for the consultations and the content of the respective Plans.

## **Public settings**

### *The management of public consultation meetings*

I derived important data on micropolitical activity from the reports of that part of the consultation process which was held in public. These public consultations generated a range of pressures which arose from the expectations of various sets of stakeholders who had views they wished to promote. Indeed there were opportunities for some of the interviewees to exercise influence within the overall policy direction which Members and officers wished to pursue. However, although the commitment to consultation appeared to be the means by which the influence of Members and officers could be constrained, the data supports the conclusions drawn in the review of literature and in the previous chapter that the LEA representatives were able to achieve their ends.

It is important to record that not all Members were entirely positive about the consultation process; for instance, one senior Councillor was of the view that the standard procedure of consultations 'goes through the motions' (C3). Yet

another Councillor thought it was possible to 'consult for consulting's sake and you have to be careful how far you go and also manage it well' (C1). This is indicative of an important conclusion coming from the interviews, that for consultations to be considered effective, it was necessary for those arranging the consultations to share their vision, listen to a range of views, and to have the skills to manage the process. I have already indicated in this chapter that such co-ordination could result in both a manipulation of the consultation process as well as an engagement in a genuine exchange of views where there might be no predetermined outcomes.

There were a number of different and interrelating agendas being played out. First the data has indicated that Members and officers were active in seeking the views of stakeholders in order to obtain a positive outcome for the policy process. Second, by consulting widely, Members and officers were acting in accordance with statutory guidance and good practice. This was essential in the context of the development of self-managing schools (Gewirtz *et al.* 1995 p. 186), in an environment where a significant number of schools had foundation status and where stakeholders felt their views should be taken into account. Third, there was the intrinsic value to collective decision-making, in accord with the partnership model of accountability (Halstead 1994 pp. 147ff.). This was particularly so in the area of early years and childcare, where partnership working not only was a prime motivator but also was buttressed by legislation. One officer encapsulated the importance she gave to consultations in her comment: 'it is not something you do to confirm what you are doing; it is the mainstream of how you do it and what you do' (O3). Fourth, Members and officers could claim some legitimacy for the proposals in the Plans if they could demonstrate that there had been an extensive and apparently democratic consultation process (Welsh and Frost 2000 p. 233). Fifth the consultation process provided an opportunity for each person involved to promote her/his own views.

Many writers have indicated the importance of engaging in a dialogue with local groups, involving the:

public sphere of mutually interlocking and overlapping networks and associations of deliberation, contestation and argumentation (Benhabib 1996 p. 74).

Yeatman has supported this approach and used the term 'little polities' to describe a space in which a relationship could be established between service deliverers and service users in order to introduce a 'politics of voice and representation' into state provided welfare services (Yeatman 1994 p. 110). My research supports the conclusions of Vincent (2000 p. 5) that there are few instances of, and opportunities for, collective parental participation at any level of the UK education system. Despite a major consultation process with parents on the SEN Action Plan, the outcome of the dialogue with various parental groups was not as positive as the parents might have hoped. Therefore it could not be assumed that because stakeholders were given a voice they were automatically empowered and enfranchised (Troyna 1994a pp. 8-9).

In order to examine some of these concepts, I wish to use evidence from the consultation meetings associated with the SEN Action Plan. The dynamics of the meetings demonstrated that power and influence could be used in a variety of ways. Groups of parents could become 'hostile' (O2) if they were orchestrated; this occurred where 'a particular school anticipated that it would be under threat' (O2). Hearsay was another factor which inhibited open discussion (O2). The response from officers in such circumstances was to tailor their messages to the audience. However even under duress, one officer indicated that he 'would never put [him]self in a position of saying an untruth' (O2). As an alternative approach, the common power tactic of withdrawal was demonstrated (Blase and Anderson 1995 p. 89); the intention was to 'minimise conflict [rather than] equalise power', as noted by Malen (1994 p. 154) in relation to schools. Although one officer felt it would have been 'good to have had franker discussions' (O2), he clearly had to be aware of 'the enthusiasms, prejudices, and the fears of the groups that were being spoken to' (O2). My study has borne out the conclusion drawn by Blase and Anderson (1995) in relation to school activity where they indicated that:

conflict was often seen as a symptom to be managed rather than a reflection of the deeper issues that may have gone unexamined or been silenced (p. 12).

It is possible that some of the parents were made to feel that they were the problem, with the result that they felt increasingly marginalised, an outcome which Gewirtz (2002 p. 171) has identified in relation to New Labour strategies of 'responsibilisation'. Officers sought to protect themselves and their reputations through strategies by which they might maintain their equilibrium to enable them to carry out their responsibilities in a manner which was consistent with their views and values, a general factor identified by Malen (1994 p. 157) in schools. I would suggest that this occurred to enable officers to exercise control over policies and practices. I have already mentioned in Chapter 4 that Members were also aware of the influence that could be exercised by their electorates and did not want to go too far ahead of public opinion. Thus there was a degree of caution associated with the framing of the proposals for inclusion in the SEN Action Plan.

A senior Councillor's views were particularly pertinent as he reflected on the dynamics of some public meetings: 'What tends to happen is when you get a large group with an emotional reaction to problems, there is a certain amount of grandstanding' (C3). The Councillor noted that there were occasions when one or two people made their points everybody else cheered and the minority became intimidated if they wished to disagree; the difficulties of having a rational debate and the polarisation of issues in large groups have been confirmed by Jaques (1984 p.10). The Councillor concluded that:

you don't have to be a politician to recognise that that is not a very productive way of consultation. You can argue that it does not find out what people want or what they think...even if they have the most honourable intentions, they have their own agendas (C3).

Overall he was concerned that such consultations did not provide 'an opportunity for people to really express their views other than in a crude, overall majority' (C3), as the minority views tended to become lost. These were helpful insights as they demonstrated that when concrete proposals

were being put forward for consultation, it was not always possible for a balanced set of views to be articulated. Indeed it has been noted that:

There is a danger that democratic participation may become more of a power struggle between rival factions than an impartial way of resolving disagreements in a spirit of co-operation (Halstead 1994 p. 160).

Another example can be found in a meeting of local parents regarding the SEN Action Plan:

there were probably sixty people there; every single person in that room was anti the inclusion policy of the LEA. There was nothing that [x] said at that meeting that gave people the confidence to feel that what the [LEA] was doing was the right thing (O4).

It was not surprising that when the actions of officers did not match the expectations of parents, the latter were uncooperative and antipathy between the two groups resulted, a general point noted by Bell (1997 p. 128) in relation to schools. As a result both Members and officers sometimes felt it was difficult to justify the extensive demands that consultation and participation made on the time, effort and commitment of those involved. It also pointed up the difficulties in managing the process when opportunities seemed to be few and far between to avoid conflict and divisiveness. Groups often felt that their chances of gaining concessions increased with the intensity of feeling with which they expressed their views. Fullan (1993) has indicated, however, that:

when the future is unknown and the environment changing in unpredictable ways, sources of difference are as important as occasions of convergence because conflict (properly managed) is essential for productive change (p. 36).

In the notes of one of the SEN Panel's meetings on 4 March 1999 it was observed that Members emphasised the importance of gaining parental trust and removing the element of confrontation between the LEA and parents. Both Members and officers regarded the feedback given by parents as being positive even though they had anticipated that those who were not in agreement with the proposals had prepared many of these responses to the consultations. Members and officers had also noted that the timescales for

responses to the first phase of the consultation were short although they acknowledged there would be further opportunities for consultation.

It was evident from an interview with the director of a parents' support group that the interaction between the skills of managing a consultation process and the commitment to consult was complex. This complexity was demonstrated by the evidence from the senior officer for early years who saw the 'voluntary sector as very empowering to parents' and recognised that the LEA could learn from their experience (O3). In contrast, the director of a parents' organisation thought that the consultations on the SEN Action Plan did not treat her organisation, and others like it, on an equal basis with the LEA. In relation to the specific consultations on the SEN Action Plan and for other consultations, she felt that these organisations should have been taken into the confidence of the Members and officers with a view to discussing the respective needs of the LEA, determining priorities and deciding how the parents' organisations could contribute to the consultation process, 'even before things are put on paper' (P1). This raises two questions for which there are no definitive answers. Did the Members and officers arrange the consultations in such a way as to demonstrate from the outset that they did not have wholehearted support for engaging with stakeholders? Or was it the case that there was no objection in principle to such an early discussion with stakeholders but that those who were managing the process had not considered this earlier involvement? The first question is predicated on how power was being exercised. The second relates more to the skill level of those managing the process. Both questions presuppose that some people who were being consulted were not being treated on an equal basis.

In spite of the critical comments from the interviewees about the way in which Members and officers handled the consultations for some of the Plans, there was evidence which demonstrated that the views of stakeholders were genuinely welcomed. It is to this area I wish to turn now.

### *Management of stakeholder meetings in drafting the Plans*

My research indicates that there were important instances where there was co-operation between stakeholders and representatives of the LEA. The manager for early years for instance, was committed to involving the voluntary, private and maintained sectors drawing in the 'biggest breadth of expertise' (O3) to ensure there was ownership and necessary investment in the Early Years Plan.

Those associated with the consultations on the SEN Action Plan were also keen to ensure that the key groups across the LEA were involved in the consultations. These groups comprised 5,000 parents of children with special educational needs, special schools, other statutory agencies and the voluntary sector. One officer for special educational needs acknowledged that she had to listen to the views of those being consulted otherwise 'you will get nowhere unless you take account of their views and move forward with them' (O4). The secretary of one of the teachers' professional associations in discussing the Plans in general thought that the more people who contributed to a Plan the more they will have some sort of affinity with, and ownership of, it (T1). However, as I have already indicated and will explore further, achieving consensus, cohesion and commitment to the objectives of each Plan was far from easy: 'getting that balance could be quite tricky' (T1). Busher (1990 p. 79) for instance has indicated that negotiations to achieve balance could be understood in terms of bargaining and exchange; however, in one sense the participation of some stakeholders could be considered more symbolic than substantive, as discussed by Hargreaves (1994 pp. 195-6) in school settings and by Thomas and Martin (1996 pp. 149-50).

On the positive side, Governors were impressed by the authoritative way in which a senior officer involved in drafting the EDP was genuinely prepared to consider the points made by the consultative group set up for the purpose of contributing to the EDP; the advantages of such a positive attitude to group activity has been noted by Bion (1961 p. 136). The senior officer's approach

reduced any anxieties which were associated with the expression of different views of the consultative group:

He listened to what was being said and adjusted the Plan to fit in. All the suggestions couldn't be taken up but the Plan was adjusted and modified in the light of discussions...We had the meetings and then we would go away and then have the next draft and go back and re-debate the draft. So it went on for several months (G1).

Governors felt that their contribution to the preparation of the EDP was one of the most worthwhile activities in which they had been involved (G2). One of the headteachers involved reinforced this view indicating that discussions were carried out in a very positive atmosphere, the paper work was circulated in advance of meetings and he 'was able to come to meetings prepared with thoughts or at the very least questions' (H1). This approach increased the range of ideas to support the process for producing the EDP. One governor indicated that an officer:

had to have ownership of it [the Plan] at all times. I think it would have finished up like a dog's breakfast had that not happened. He had overall control to give a style and a shape to the Plan but what we were doing were challenging and letting him think and bringing it back and listening (G1).

Such a process has been described by Schrage (1990):

as a *shared creation*: two or more individuals with complementary skills interacting to create a shared understanding that none had previously possessed or could have come to on their own (p. 40).

I would suggest that here was another example of benign power where the officer sought to ensure that group decision-making was arrived at through compromise for the good of the group and to ensure the EDP was completed. Although I would not wish to diminish the positive approach it is perhaps worth recalling the research of Malen and Ogawa (1988 p. 264) in school governance councils, that the norms of propriety and civility can on occasions function to mute criticism.

In one sense the positive climate and morale of the group as demonstrated by the supportive contribution of its members to the EDP, helped to legitimise it with other headteachers, governors and teachers' representatives; these



features of group activity have been identified by Adair (1986 p. 22). This was confirmed by the teacher representative:

I didn't get the impression that people were being put down in any way, or whoever was chairing that meeting was pushing the meeting to an end...I had the impression that people could say what they wanted (T1).

A similar positive response was received from a secondary school headteacher who indicated that one of the strongest points during the consultations on the Behaviour Support Plan was that 'people were able to say what they felt...behaviour management certainly encourages strong feelings' (H2). In his view the subsequent incorporation of comments from the consultations 'made for a pretty good Plan' (H2). However, in both these examples it was unlikely that the contributions markedly altered the general thrust of the overall policy being pursued by Members and officers, a conclusion drawn by Hargreaves (1991 p. 54) in relation to teachers in schools.

These comments from the participants demonstrated that the production of the EDP and the Behaviour Support Plan evolved iteratively and that the approach to the production of the Plans had beneficial effects on the evolution of relationships between stakeholders and officers in the LEA. However, an alternative comment on some of the involvement of headteachers in the production of these Plans was provided by one headteacher who expected to see the same principles of openness and transparency she adopted in her approach to others replicated in the treatment of herself (H3); by implication she felt that her contributions were not valued.

Senior Members of the Council also recognised that for consultations to be meaningful, honesty was important, even though some people might not like the views being expressed. Councillors also expressed a commitment to being honest:

I believe if you lie to people then at the end of the day this will come back on you, so you might just as well tell the truth at the beginning, even if they may not like it (C1).

The attitudes of officers to openness were succinctly summarised by the officer with responsibility for early years: 'on the whole if I did not feel that I could be open with people and be real, I would be concerned about how real the process was' (O3). There were times, however, when officers were in the privileged position of having confidential information which could not be divulged; this would be the case when reports were being prepared for panel meetings which were held in private.

A senior Member expressed her commitment to 'making the public at large aware that you are listening to what they are saying and you are taking on board their concerns and worries' (C1). However, as I will later describe further, there was a different perception amongst some parents of children with special educational needs. This was an example of how education policy could intertwine with emotional and family issues as identified by Marshall (2000 p. 139), and how parents sought to be the 'champions of their own children's education' (Whitty *et al.* 1998 p. 105).

The manner in which the views of stakeholders was collected also demonstrated how power and influence might be exercised. Obtaining views through a paper exercise was different to one where there were face to face meetings. One of the headteachers (H3) acknowledged that the response to consultations depended very much on the priority that was accorded to the consultations by headteachers. She and the secondary school headteacher (H2) welcomed the face to face meetings where the views of individuals and groups could be considered and where such views could have more impact (H3)<sup>1</sup>.

This section together with the previous section has provided insights into the complexity of the micropolitical activity that was evident in a range of settings associated with the preparation of the Plans. The type of consultation that was being conducted could influence the responses of both those who were being consulted and those who were managing the process. Where

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<sup>1</sup> The secondary school headteacher (H2) confirmed that 'people don't reply to written consultations because of the time involved'.

contentious matters were under discussion and where opposition might be expected to their proposals, the LEA representatives sought to manage the agendas as far as possible in order to safeguard their position. In consultations in informal settings, the LEA representatives were able to engage in more open debate and discussion, however, during this process, officers in the main were able to exercise their influence on the outcomes of the discussions. Power could be exercised not only through managing the consultation process but also how views were selected for incorporation into the Plans. It is to this matter I now wish to turn.

*Filtering the responses from the consultations and selecting the content of the Plans*

Data derived from the interviews show the LEA representatives influenced the policy process by filtering the responses and selecting the views arising from consultations. In one sense this was necessary because of the diversity of the views expressed, however, the selection became political, a general conclusion reached by Lindle (1999 p. 176), and brought into sharp relief the value and weight given to the constituent voices.

A number of interviewees recognised that the LEA was ultimately responsible for producing the Plans; Members and officers claimed the right to make the final judgements, an approach which was in accord with the chain of responsibility model of accountability (Halstead 1994 p. 151). The interviewees were also aware to some degree that the Plans were being produced by those people who had been elected and appointed through the ballot box (Kogan 1986 p. 50), and:

that we were merely making a contribution towards it [the EDP]... It was a question of discussing the issues, which we may have raised, and seeing how best they could be taken into account in the development of the next draft of the Plan. When one got the next draft inevitably you plunged into it to see if the suggestions were incorporated in it. In some cases they were clearly incorporated, in other cases they were taken into account in one way or another but it was certainly a co-operative exercise (G2).

It was very clear that these Plans 'set the scene for change' (H3). Although managers expected many stakeholders to experience anxiety it did not seem to inhibit the officers' programme for change in relation to the SEN Action Plan: 'It was a year of considerable agony at times, but it has been worthwhile' (O2). However, the officers felt they had sufficient confidence in the proposals they had incorporated into the SEN Action Plan with which the various stakeholders could agree (O2). The officers were sufficiently assured that although some stakeholders 'will get a bit aeriated about it, there is enough in there that they can see that it makes sense' (O2). In their feedback on the consultations, recorded by an Independent Consultant (1999) employed by the LEA to provide a report on the effectiveness of the consultations, some parents, particularly of children in special schools, said that their children's views had not been presented and that quotes within the feedback document were biased towards the professionals and parents supportive of inclusion.

The hope that there were evident benefits in the SEN Action Plan for stakeholders did not allay the concerns of some of those parents of children, especially those with moderate learning difficulties, who were in special schools (O2). Further, in its initial stages the proposals for inclusion in the SEN Action Plan 'had a dramatic effect on anxiety levels of headteachers and staff in special schools' (H1) because the proposed changes appeared to threaten their interests and security, a factor noted by Judson (1991 cited in Morrison 1998 p. 122) in research into the effects of change in organisations. It was as if officers did not either recognise or wish to understand other people's viewpoints. The special school sector had been in a strong 'stable state', a concept explored by Schön (1971 pp. 9ff) where institutional stability was reinforced by established personal identity and systems of values. However, the managers and staff in these schools were having their identities undermined and their individual self concepts threatened, general features which Ball (1987 p. 32) has identified arising from innovation. This anxiety, loss and struggle have also been recognised by Marris (1975 p. 2 cited in Fullan 1991 p. 30-2) and are examples of 'a reactive strategy to

change' (Bonal 2000 p. 210). It led also to ambiguity and opportunities for a shift in the established power structures between schools and the LEA.

However as part of the change process one headteacher explained that at the time of his interview, 'I think people are being a little more rational in their responses' (H1). This special school headteacher recognised that in part some of his optimism may have been influenced by the fact that his was a pathfinder special school tasked with examining how the SEN Action Plan could be implemented – 'taking it from a philosophy to a reality' (H1). He also noted that:

there had been a significant change in mood and attitude of colleague heads towards what it is we are trying to do and they are starting to embrace some of that (H1).

This was consistent with the conclusions drawn by Morrison (1998 p. 130) who noted that the needs and motivations of people could change over time and context, and at any one moment there could be a combination of motivations and needs at work. Further, change has also been identified as being 'riddled with dilemmas, ambivalences and paradoxes' (Fullan 1991 p. 350). Perhaps more importantly in terms of discourse: 'What [was] contentious quickly become[s] normal, natural, reasonable, taken for granted' (Hargreaves and Reynolds 1989 p.16). In this respect Greenfield has also indicated that 'people regularly use language to manipulate, coax and coerce each other' in order to 'inculcate' different versions of reality (Greenfield cited in Milley 2002 p. 52). It was through language and discourse that policy makers and managers framed their policies, and where their 'real power...lay, rather than in less subtle attempts to shift the levers of cultural manipulation' (Trowler 1998 p. 79).

There was an expectation amongst those being consulted that, as part of the information gathering process, their views would modify those held by the LEA representatives; they were surprised when these representatives did not share these expectations. The parent representing her local group felt that 'consultations are only valuable if comments and views that are put forward are valued and considered' (P2). She felt that the consultations on the SEN Action Plan were:

just a way of paying lip service to people...because at the end of the day it has been decided by the powers that be, that this is going to happen...come what may (P2).

The frustration of many people may have arisen as the special school headteacher indicated because:

they didn't feel their opinions had been considered appropriately because they had no evidence of it being there...the difference between voting and consulting (H1).

This was consistent with the conclusions of Welsh and Frost (2000 p. 233) who have indicated that some consultation exercises, from the perception of some parents, offered a chimera of democracy, since no guarantees were given by the Members and officers that they would be bound by the inputs to the process.

Many parents for instance, therefore, became permanent opponents to the proposals in the SEN Action Plan in contrast to some of the other interviewees who in the main supported the proposals in the other Plans. Fraser (1994 p. 79 cited in Marshall and Anderson 1994) has suggested that structures for public consultations can become mechanisms that hide domination and that there is no single sphere in which all can contribute their views. There was a difference, therefore, between democratic involvement in decision-making and consultation, as noted by Geddes (1996 cited in Whitty *et al.* 1998 p. 135). Fraser (1994 p. 79 cited in Marshall and Anderson 1994 p. 178) further argues that Habermas's (1989) claim of openness to participation does not take into account the subtle ways in which individuals and groups are disenfranchised from participating in the public arena.

I have indicated previously that the consultation process associated with the EDP was generally considered to be positive, although as a headteacher (H1) noted, those participating in discussions relating to the EDP often 'don't have the same agenda'. On occasions consensus was reached or options were identified which were easier to take forward and could be pursued. However, according to the primary school headteacher, on other occasions:

some bits fall by the wayside however important they are, just in terms of practicalities. That is how political things happen, isn't it? (H3).

It is not surprising, therefore, as another headteacher recognised that giving opinions meant 'you can't have agreement every time;...consultation is not a vote' (H1). It was clear that some proposals which were put forward by the members of the groups would not be accepted, especially if they were not consistent with the overall aims of Members and officers. Although such sifting of views was an established feature of the consultation process the criteria by which those in positions of power carried out this sifting were not always made explicit. This has been noted elsewhere in consultations on school organisation (Welsh and Frost 2000 p. 233). It has been suggested that the criteria by which decisions might be made should be established before democratic decision-making was started (Bonnett 1979 p. 166).

The way in which the reactions to the proposals in the Plans was managed was a further feature on the landscape of micropolitics. For instance, Members and officers were determined to resist the pressure from a number of parent groups who held irreconcilable views regarding the proposals for inclusion in the SEN Action Plan. Thus officers were in a dilemma where they recognised that a large proportion of the people who had been consulted did not want any changes to the organisation of special schools. There would have been a drive from stakeholders to go down the route of no change if that had been an option (O4). However, as I have already indicated, one officer stated, 'this was not an option for us [the LEA]' (O2) for there had been a longstanding commitment from the officers to support the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools. Such a commitment demonstrated how a number of professionals and advocates of particular policies could cluster around specific areas of action, having similar understandings and norms (Marshall 2000 p. 127). Because of this commitment to change, one parent felt that what was being proposed in the SEN Action Plan did 'not give parents confidence to feel that what [the LEA] was doing was the right thing' (P2), nor that their views were being heard. There is clear evidence here that such dissenting groups did not consider themselves bound by the outcomes of corporate decision-making because they felt it was unjust, a factor noted by Bridges (1980 p. 69) in schools. The

infant school headteacher also indicated that some consultation meetings on the EDP had been 'axe grinding' sessions (H3)<sup>2</sup>.

I have also explained previously that it would be a misrepresentation of the data to think that every part of the planning process and the content of the Plans was hammered out in a contentious way through micropolitical activity. There were examples where the key representatives from the LEA in the policy process accepted comments from various groups and individuals. I would suggest, however, that they were still exercising power, in a somewhat subtle way. In general terms they were prepared to accept proposals arising from reasoned debate as long as these did not compromise the overall thrust of the respective Plans. Representatives on the consultative group for preparing the EDP thought that the positive dynamics of the group, facilitated by a senior officer were important to ensure there was a constructive outcome to the drafting process: 'We did try to modify it [EDP] within the context of our relationship' (G1). The nature of the interchanges reflected the motivating factors behind the participants' involvement in the planning process; a similar conclusion was drawn by Paechter (1995 p .28) in her research into curriculum innovation.

As a result of a positive attitude between officers and the headteachers, governors and the teacher representative who were interviewed, some of the contents of the Plans demonstrated the influence of the stakeholder representatives as they promoted their interests. In the EDP 'there were appropriate references to the work of governors' (G2), an indication of the points directly put forward by governors. Indeed a governor thought that by means of challenge and suggesting improvements, the consultative group for the EDP influenced the content of the Plan and agreed the structure of the Plan with the result that 'I don't think there was any area where we didn't contribute to the Plan' (G1). Another governor felt that he could influence Members and officers as they did not always have the breadth of view that came from working in schools: 'the people at the centre [have] to keep up to date and completely *au fait* with the work at the sharp end' (G2). However,

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<sup>2</sup> She also noted that 'axes have to be ground occasionally otherwise they don't get sharp'.



as I indicated in the section on the influence of officers in the previous chapter, officers set the overall parameters for the Plan and it was within these parameters that governors and others provided their views.

Furthermore the representative of the teachers' association indicated that he had made the most impact on the section in the EDP on teacher recruitment and retention – one of his major concerns (T1). He also felt that he had a significant influence on the proposals relating to the inclusion of children with behaviour difficulties (T1). He recognised that although points were made, the context was one of 'consultation rather than negotiation' (T1). It was apparent through this process that although not everything might have been accepted, 'the differences and agreements hopefully became clear' (T1). These comments illustrate the conclusion drawn by Taylor *et al.* (1997 p. 50) that different interests could give different emphases to various aspects of the policy.

The analysis of the data recorded in this section complements that which was recorded in the previous section. Filtering the responses from consultations was a clear demonstration of the influence of officers in particular. Officers either accepted or discarded views according to how far they supported the general thrust of the Plans. The reactions of the interviewees to this process would have been coloured by whether their views were accepted; these reactions would have also had a bearing on the estimation they had of Members and officers and it is to this matter I now wish to turn.

#### *The perception by parents that the officers were authoritative*

My analysis suggests that both Members and officers assumed that their way of conceptualising matters was somehow 'right' rather than acknowledging that their discourse was associated with the power they held. Similar responses from parents have been noted by Cook and Swain (2001 p. 197) in the case of a closure of a special school, where 'battle lines were drawn up' once parents felt there was nothing left to be developed.

For all the commitment to consultation and partnership working, one headteacher felt that the general approach taken by the LEA to planning and policy making was very much top down and centralised (H3)<sup>3</sup>, illustrative of the hierarchical relationships described by Kogan (1986 pp. 112f). This headteacher was not alone in her view, as a parent felt that the consultation process on the SEN Action Plan had not been effective and consequently was highly critical of its outcome:

There is an arrogance in an educational system...perhaps based on an authority structure and that it is sometimes quite difficult for people to stand back and say: "I am not in the classroom now; these are parents they may even be better educated than I am. I need to respect where they are coming from as well" (P2).

Her further comments reinforced her view that Members and officers were:

not always thinking as clearly or as innocently as they could. They do need other people's opinions, they can't assume that their opinion is "the opinion"...At the end of the day it has been decided by the powers that be, that this is going to happen...come what may ...and although you can make your contributions and comments these are not always taken into account...The education system can't just drive a horse and cart through; they do need to stop and pick up people along the way and find the best route through rather than just thinking: "That's the right road; we will go down that road and we will get to the place at the end," when somebody else might turn round and say: "I know a quicker way. I know a shorter way" (P2).

In short there were incompatibilities and subcultural clashes between the LEA representatives and some parent groups which could have been symptomatic of more fundamental questions of the structures and processes of class and society, identified by Shapiro (1982 p. 524). Some of these clashes were associated with status inequality, a feature noted by Marshall and Anderson (1994 p. 178), and the degree of access permitted to social, cultural and symbolic resources, as identified by Gunter (2002 p. 11). These in part could have resulted from the way in which the consultations were managed in the SEN Action Plan, in terms of presenting the issues and responding to concerns, the perceived lack of respect shown to the parents and the apparent unwillingness to consider alternative views. As a

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<sup>3</sup> Her attitude may have been influenced to some extent from previous proposals that the LEA had made to reorganise schools in the area in which her school was located.

consequence, the micropolitical activity of officers became more obvious and disagreements more apparent leading to increased barriers to communication. From their perspective, parents felt that they were outsiders and their views were rendered irrelevant or illegitimate, a conclusion drawn also by Morley (1999 p. 4) in her research. The approach taken to parents was also consistent with Fullan's description of 'balkanisation' to denote the position where strong loyalties form within a group. Fullan (1993) has indicated that indifference or even hostility to other groups could result and lead ultimately to giving insufficient consideration to other ideas (p. 83).

The parent of a local group also felt that in the past parents had been made to feel 'just a second class citizen...like we [i.e. officers] are the professionals, we know what is best for your child' (P2). Malen (1994 p. 151) has indicated that parents have demonstrated deference to the expertise of professionals. Over a period of time the parent felt that despite the 'stumbling block' between officers and parents, 'in general things are moving round to the fact that we had a life before we were parents, we did have a profession' (P2). Her assumptions about status were consistent with the conclusions of Polsky (1991 cited in Morley 1999) who has suggested:

that individuals or groups with more cultural capital, in terms of educational qualifications and professional status, can have power over those denied access to such capital (p. 111).

Ellison (1997 p. 714 cited in Vincent 2000) has concluded that some groups will be more adept than others in engaging with the policy process; Vincent (2000) has also provided numerous references to the imbalance of power in favour of the professionals.

In addition, the parent was concerned that the professionals generally did not keep parents informed where there was a lack of resources and the needs of children could not be met:

officers won't tell you that, they are not allowed to tell you that. Those that take you aside and say: "If you went to [the LEA] and said this was inadequate or if you ask for this, we could get it" (P2).

With such information she would have been prepared to campaign for additional resources within the LEA and with other agencies (P2). However,

in this instance a lack of transparency was a feature of some of the discussions between officers and parents.

This parent also felt that there were not:

many other parents around like myself who have the time, energy, and commitment ...to cope with those professionals (P2).

Her views support the conclusions drawn by Grutzik *et al.* (1995) who expressed their concern:

that for some families these kinds of requirements are heavy burdens given the nature of their economic situations, their cultural perspectives on schooling, and their family obligations (p. 20 cited in Whitty *et al.* 1998).

The parent that I interviewed represented those who had limited power but who nevertheless were 'the vibrant counter publics' (Marshall 2000 p. 150). She was able to find the right words to express her thoughts and those of other parents; however, she felt she was not heard.

The comment on the attitude of Councillors and officers from the director of the parents' voluntary organisation is powerful. Her language indicated that a number of parents felt oppressed through the dominant discourse of officers, and the resulting influence they were able to exercise:

Some parents individually may have had some difficulty [in contributing in consultation meetings] because for many parents the only experience they have of teachers and education is of the authority figure. Either they are totally confrontational or they are totally in awe of them and are just completely thrown by the power structure...it just brings to the surface again all those emotions which they have been trying to dampen down. They don't want to cry but actually that is what they want to do; they want to cry so they are choking up (P1).

From the parents' point of view what might have been seen as an isolated instance of having to interpret what was being said at one consultation meeting took on importance when seen in the context of the language and the dominant discourse that seemed to exclude them from engaging with the consultation process as a whole. Morley (1999 p. 4) and Whitty *et al.* (1998 p. 136) have written of such dominant discourses.

In short, the director of the parents' voluntary organisation was concerned that there should be respect for all the partners in the education service (P1). She recognised that statutory responsibilities had to be delivered, however:

it is how you inform people and bring them on board. It is about sharing what agendas you have got to meet, so that people can understand why you need to be taking that particular standpoint. I often feel there is arrogance in an education system wherever that might be perhaps based on the authority structure (P1).

Alongside these comments she also suggested that Members and officers should recognise and 'respect the battles that the parents have been through to get where they are now' (P1). She indicated that systems were required to reach those individuals who have an interest: 'publicising those communication structures so there is an ease of two way dialogue' (P1). In summary, she felt that individuals in the LEA were exercising their power in a way which was not conducive to developing and maintaining positive relationships. The perception of parents being on the 'outside' has been discussed by Hempel (1986 p. 136) and is confirmed by my data analysis. This is illustrative of one of the disadvantages of the chain of responsibility model of accountability where some minority interest groups clearly can be left dissatisfied (Halstead 1994 p. 159).

The two parent activists commented that they felt they were not fully respected socially and personally through the consultation process – using the terminology of the 1990s, they did not feel 'empowered'. Although Morley (1999 p. 109) has suggested that this is an abstract concept and has not been theorised to any significant extent, it has entered the discourses of education, management, development studies and the public services. It ostensibly involves 'enfranchisement, consultation, involvement, partnership, participation and choice' (Troyna 1994a p. 4). However, my research is consistent with that of Morley, who has suggested that consultation can mask an insidious move towards authoritarianism (Morley 1995 cited in Morley 1999 p. 109). The parent of a local group provided the following insight: 'There is no way you can reverse the decision or change what has been

prescribed' (P2). In essence such consultations could be seen as symbolic and tokenistic given that authority for controlling the policy process resided locally with Members and officers. In similar vein, Mansbridge (1990) asserted that:

the transformation of 'I' into 'we' brought about through political deliberation can easily mask subtle forms of control. Even the language people use as they reason together usually favours one way of seeing things and discourages others. Subordinate groups sometimes cannot find the right voice or words to express their thoughts, and when they do so, they discover they are not heard, [They] are silenced, encouraged to keep their wants inchoate, and heard to say 'yes' when what they have said is 'no' (p. 127).

To a large degree the amount and type of power and autonomy that participants in the consultation process had was dependent on the amount and type of power exercised by those LEA representatives who were managing this process. Scott (1994 p. 46) had also noted this general point in his discussion on agency and it is matter I wish to explore further in the section in the next chapter in relation to how those being consulted may be heard.

## **Conclusion**

I want to take this opportunity of providing a brief overview of my data analysis; this will be supplemented in the next chapter with a discussion of the key themes arising from my research.

I emphasised in Chapter 1 that the policy process is not a linear model of inputs and outputs. It has been evident that human agency was a key feature in the policy process. Overall the insights provided by this study of micropolitical activity support the view that the rational-technicist approach is unable to explain fully the policy process. With a focus on organisational variables I have been able to explore power arrangements and how power can operate cumulatively as policy evolves. Although I have concentrated my analysis on the roles of a number of individuals, I have also tried to avoid thinking that the individual provides the main or the only insight into reality.

My research has covered a wide range of micropolitical activity and has demonstrated that the different agendas and positions of the respective stakeholders have resulted in a complex set of relationships. The tensions between the different principles held by the interviewees had to be worked through pragmatically ultimately to produce the Plans. The production of the SEN Action Plan and the Behaviour Support Plan for instance, provided evidence of attempts 'to suture together and over matters of difference between participating and competing interests in the process of policy text production' (Taylor *et al.* 1997 p. 50) and in particular provided evidence for the exercise of micropolitical activity.

Within the space that was available to modify the Plans, Elected Members and officers comprised elites (Dahl 1961) influencing both the preparations for, and the contents of, the Plans. They used their resources to ensure their developing views were included in the Plans, as indicated by Boyd *et al.* (1994 p. 128), and firmly located the content of the Plans in the local, political and historical world of the LEA – in accord with Levin's (2001 p. 154) conclusions. Power was exercised in subtle, sophisticated and often subterranean ways; this was very much part of the world in which people were located in general but was also shaped by the political world of one LEA in particular. Those with the greatest influence were able to achieve most of their expectations through the exercise of power and control.

It is evident that within this research project there were instances where many people had some power in relation to others, even though they lacked the power to determine policies or outcomes, a conclusion drawn by Young about domination in society (1990 cited in Gewirtz 2002 p.150). For instance the representatives of formal groupings in the LEA, such as headteachers and governors, could exercise considerable influence if a proposed change was going too far or too fast as demonstrated by the consultations on the Behaviour Support Plan. In addition it was apparent from the data that headteachers thought that opportunities would arise to modify the Plans when attention was given to the detail of implementation. On the basis of my

research I would expect micropolitical activity to be a key feature of these subsequent meetings between officers and headteachers, for instance as they determined the details of special educational provision.

The form that micropolitical activity took varied according to the setting, the type of disagreement or conflict, the context of the issue, the participants involved and their particular interests, and the resources that were available. Thus on the one hand there were examples of LEA representatives seeking to protect their positions and achieve their ends through managing agendas and being overly selective of the views expressed in consultations. On the other hand, there were representatives of the LEA who appeared to encourage positive interpersonal relations and to develop trust and collaboration.

My data analysis has shown that there are different emphases to meanings, values and beliefs and that these are connected to power, control and hierarchy. In this respect organisational culture as expressed through the LEA representatives was based on competing interests and ideas, a feature noted by Morley (1999 pp. 83-8) in her analysis of higher education. My research, like that of Welsh and Frost (2000) also demonstrates that 'the exercise of such power is legitimated through apparently democratic procedures' (p. 233). The analysis has also provided further evidence to that of Vincent (2000) and Vincent and Martin (2000) that parents in particular can be disenchanted with the consultations in which they were involved because they felt that their views were ignored. Deem *et al.* (1995 p. 135) have considered this factor in relation to governing bodies, however, stakeholders such as governors and headteachers, as I have indicated, were able to work with officers to shape the Plans where there was little contentious subject matter.

The dynamics of micropolitical activity were subtle and complex and the activity itself was multifaceted. In particular the three 'faces' of power (Dahl 1961; Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Lukes 1974) have been evident and together with 'benign' power (McCalla 2002) have contributed to refining



policy in a LEA. Although my analysis has indicated the complex way in which the specific forms of power were expressed, there are indications that the 'first' and 'second faces of power' were more predominant in the actions of the LEA representatives during the process for producing the four Plans, although the 'third face of power' should not be underestimated.

In the Conclusion which follows I wish to draw these and the other themes arising from this research into the wider context of the literature and the professional context in which I work.

## **CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION**

This conclusion:

- i) summarises the general themes arising from my research into the ways in which micropolitical activity shapes and refines central government policy in a local context;
- ii) indicates the contribution this research has made to knowledge;
- iii) summarises the relevance of the research to my continuing professional development;
- iv) points to the way in which micropolitical activity continues to mediate policy in a LEA within the new constitutional arrangements arising from the modernising agenda for local government;
- v) indicates the possibilities for disseminating my research.

Through the deliberate choice of the Plans and the participants as important cases I have sought to bring a critical and analytical approach to understand the ways in which micropolitics in a LEA can refine and mediate the policy of central government in unstructured ways which might not have been anticipated when the policy had been incorporated into legislation.

In Chapter 1 I outlined a number of different fields of enquiry and arising from these several detailed and contextualised questions began to emerge, including some key questions put forward by Malen (1994); as I have proceeded with the thesis I have sought to provide some responses to these matters. Malen's questions have related more to the study of micropolitics, however, my research has sought to explore the more extensive issue of the influence of micropolitical activity on the policy process in a LEA.

### **General themes of the research**

The themes arising from this research should contribute to the continuing debate about macro and micro influences on the development of policy.

There are two main and interrelated themes to this research. First, that the influence of LEAs in the policy process is closely prescribed by central government. Second that a study of micropolitical activity can provide an informed understanding of the complexity of the policy process as networks of individuals and groups exercise power and influence to refine central government policy.

#### *Main influence of central government*

At one level it is clear that central government has increasingly set the framework for the policy process (Dale 1992 p. 393). The panoply of secondary legislation and advice which supplements primary legislation is evidence of the way in which the policy process has been centralised over the last fifteen years. Although local government may be conceived as an element of the state, it is clearly subsidiary to central government, with one of its main roles as contextualising central government policies. Generally local government does not have the political or the financial resources available to alter fundamentally the direction of national policy. This control by central government over the direction of policy is reinforced by the responsibilities which local government is required to fulfil within the legal and evaluative framework of the state (cf. Neave 1988 pp. 8-10).

My research provides evidence of the local challenges and pressures which arise from central government policies and the way in which they have been adapted and refined through micropolitical activity. At local level once these policies have been accepted and adopted I would agree with the conclusions drawn by Bottery and Wright (1996) in relation to schools, that they have come to be part of the everyday discourse (p. 94).

#### *The influence of elites in the LEA*

On one level, therefore, it would appear that the central government control of the policy process was overwhelming. At the micro level in local government there were, however, opportunities where central government

policy could be refined. In the main such influence was demonstrated through micropolitical activity. At this local level my research has confirmed Trowler's (1998 p. 84) conclusions that a relatively small number of people, an elite, could influence the direction of the policy process. In relation to my research this was particularly evident that those with technical knowledge and the clearest objectives were able to exercise the most power. As LEA officers had a command both of the bigger picture and the detail of the policy process, they were able to exercise the most influence over the direction of the process. However the ambitions of officers could be moderated by Elected Members through their status and position which resulted from their political power base; the understanding of Members of the general and detailed context was also a factor which should not be underestimated.

The outcome was that these elites were 'able to exert a significant influence on policy decision-making and text production' (Scott 1994 p. 41).

Fundamentally these elites were successful because it was their responsibility to achieve required outcomes, they were fewer in number than diverse pressure groups, they were active in as many arenas as possible and had control over agendas and information; factors identified in a commercial setting by Pettigrew (1972 pp. 202-3). Although there were multiple voices it was, as Ball (1994b p. 112) concluded, the voices of the most elite that had most legitimacy at most points in time. The likelihood of achieving ambitious agendas was most probable where there was unity of purpose between the key democratically elected representatives and officers involved in strategic management.

### *Complexity of the policy process*

The complexity of decision-making in the policy process was evident. Micropolitical activity meant that the policy process did not flow in one direction and was contested at different places and at different times (Scott 2000 p. 79). At the most straightforward level, decision-makers exercised power and those who informed decisions did so by means of influence. Although those in command of the detail of the process might initially be in an

influential position when it came to making decisions, restrictions could be placed on their activities. Such restrictions could relate to matters of principle or the degree to which political support could be given to certain proposals; however, in such cases compromises were negotiated. Importantly those who were most familiar with the detail of the policy process were also those who were most aware of the power of influential stakeholders such as headteachers and governors. The elites found difficulty in going beyond what such stakeholders would deem to be acceptable.

Ultimately in the LEA it was the democratically elected representatives who felt that they were making the final decisions in the policy process. Nevertheless the reliance of Elected Members on officers for detailed advice somewhat moderated the influence of the Members. In summary, my research points up the difference between influencing decision-making and ultimately making a decision.

#### *Micropolitical activity at LEA level*

My research indicates that power was dispersed through the Members and senior officers in the LEA, albeit not equally. In this respect I have viewed power as a relative rather than an absolute factor which is fluid, distributed and redistributed (Foucault 1980 p. 98). Thus power did not originate from one political centre, nor was it evenly distributed among individuals at all sites and at all moments – indeed not all sites were equally important.

Consequently some individuals and groups such as Elected Members and officers within the LEA were able to exercise more power than others because of their positional status within the LEA which provided the source of their authority. This power and influence was not found in either 'top down' or 'bottom up' arrangements but rather it was evident through a complex interrelationship of both. It was apparent that the influence to refine and modify central government policy at a local level resided in micro contexts where micropolitical activity was played out between the elites, i.e. Members and officers, and elites in pluralist settings e.g. headteachers and governors.

Although consultations might form a key component in the policy process, they had a variable influence on decision-making. In terms of the outcomes of the policy process, who was to be consulted and the management of consultation meetings and discussions were as important as the contents of the Plans themselves. The subjects for discussion could raise expectations about what might be included in the contents of the respective Plan. However, at the outset LEA representatives would be aware of what they did not want included in a particular Plan but were not always aware of what they did want in each Plan. The content of consultation papers was critical together with the way in which the agendas of consultation meetings were structured in order to avoid contentious issues – the ‘second face of power’ (Bachrach and Baratz 1962); however, such stratagems were not always fully achieved.

In relation to the consultations, the reactions of some people could, nevertheless, temporarily divert the process no matter how much time and effort might be expended on planning to ensure its smooth management. However, because ultimately it was the elites who were able to exercise their influence, the process could be retrieved. It is not surprising, therefore, that on occasions the policy process went ahead in cautious and small steps during which micropolitical activity was evident.

The way in which language was used was an important component of micropolitical activity. The discourse of Members and officers, for instance, worked to their advantage as they had privileged knowledge, were able to control both the content and the agenda of the policy process, were able to define some of the key terms e.g. inclusion, and were able to silence other people. As a consequence Members and officers consciously and sometimes unconsciously worked against those who had less formal power or influence with the result that some of the contributions of the latter group were ‘rendered irrelevant or illegitimate by dominant discourses’ (Morley 1999 p. 4)

It was also clear that during the consultations it was difficult to separate the formulation of proposals from their implementation. The responses of consultees to the former could be fuelled by the perceived implications of the latter. It was unlikely that significant numbers of written responses would be received unless a matter was very contentious. Consultation meetings could be seen by stakeholders as potentially more productive as they provided opportunities to clarify issues and enabled a robust exchange of views, especially if a proposed change was going too far or too fast. However, as I have demonstrated the agendas for such meetings could be prepared with the aim of avoiding contentious issues, or if such matters were raised then their resolution could be dealt with in a private meeting at some later date.

I have indicated that increasingly in the managerial arrangements in a LEA a commitment to consultation with partners and stakeholders is essential. However, Reay (1998 p. 188) has noted that the speed of external policy changes frequently demands swift responses and leadership from managers; as a consequence consultation may be viewed as tokenistic and might not permit an in-depth assessment of all the views expressed.

It was also clear that the modifications and refinements that were made to central government policy originated with the elites in the LEA. Elected Members and officers meeting in private filtered the views obtained from the consultations. Such meetings away from the public gaze, might be used to determine the areas for discussion at public consultation meetings, the resolution of contentious matters and which points arising from the comments from consultations would be incorporated into the drafts of Plans.

A key finding of my research, as indicated also by Vincent (2000), was that although parents were invited to be part of the consultation process, many of them and their representatives felt that they were disenfranchised. Many parents, according to my interviewees, felt that their views were not seriously considered because the direction of policy had already been determined and they felt that they were passive recipients of the LEA policy.

The 'third face of power' has also suffused social relations such that power was not apparent (Lukes 1974). Thus the presentation of proposals which were considered to be well argued led to the perception and '[a] reputation for management efficiency [which made] it difficult for anyone to challenge a corporate plan' (Burton 1993 p. 161). Further the struggle to define the contents of the respective Plans could be regarded not as the politics of the possible but rather as the politics of the probable. In effect they could have set the parameters for what was thinkable within the LEA and in schools:

Arguably this is authority and power in their most subtle and most invidious forms defining what "consciousness", what ideological representations are legitimised in the practice of education (Evans *et al.* 1993 cited in Penney and Evans 1994 p. 39).

The 'three faces of power' (Dahl 1961; Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Lukes 1974) provide a multidimensional insight into the actions and the relationships of participants in the policy process. The ebb and flow of human actions in my study have resulted in the first and second faces of power subtly merging together. In addition the theoretical framework of benign power provided by McCalla (2002) has provided helpful insights into the actions of the participants as they influence government policy. It would have been almost impossible to complete the Plans if negative power had been the sole form of power that was being exercised.

My research reinforces the conclusions of Dror (1986) that policy making may be regarded as 'fuzzy gambling', in which not only the odds change but also the rules change during the process:

At any given moment a high probability of low probability events occurring. In other words, surprise dominates' (p. 186).

Throughout this research there was evidence that the policy process was evolutionary and not linear, therefore, given the complexity of micropolitics in the policy process, my research indicates how problematic it would be to predict all the responses that might be generated to a significant policy measure. In some situations this complexity was magnified by seemingly insignificant events becoming important. The perception of the LEA and its organisation provided the setting in which the key features of the local policy



process were expressed: its unpredictability, the ambiguity of the responses of people to the process and the changing contextual circumstances. As a result of this interplay of micropolitical activity: 'The pudding eaten is a far cry from the original recipe' (Raab 1994b p. 24).

### **The contribution this research has made to knowledge**

This research has broken new ground in two ways. I believe such a detailed analysis of the policy process in a LEA and the examination of micropolitical activity in a LEA are both innovations.

The focus of this research has been complex. LEAs are relatively complex organisations. Further, micropolitical activity involving LEA representatives and other stakeholders is complex because it involves the actions of people. As I have sought to capture this complexity I have engaged with a range of theoretical frameworks. The themes that I have identified in the previous section illustrate the contribution to knowledge. These themes have exemplified generally the way in which power was exercised by elites and especially the way in which the power of knowledge was exercised by the LEA representatives. Although other research has examined micropolitical activity in schools and universities (Hoyle 1982, 1986; Ball 1987; Blase 1991, 1995; Malen 1994; Mawhinney 1997; Morley 1999) and evidence has been produced to explain how power and influence were exercised, my research explores these in the context of a LEA.

At the outset of this thesis I indicated that little research had apparently been undertaken into the policy process in LEAs. The work that I have undertaken has confirmed that there are similarities between micropolitical activity at institution level, both schools and universities, and micropolitical activity within a LEA. Although the context might be different in terms of the organisation and the aspects of the policy process under discussion, the human dimension in micropolitical activity is similar. Perhaps this should not come as a surprise as the exercise of power and influence appears to be one of the drivers for the actions of elites wherever they may be found.

The methodology has also been innovative in that I have undertaken this research as an insider in the LEA. This privileged role has enabled me to have access to a range of data that might not have been available to an external researcher; an issue I discussed in Chapter 3.

As I have simultaneously engaged with the literature and with my data insights have arisen which have illuminated the respective influences of structure and agency. It has become clear that there is a complex interrelationship between the policy which is set by central government and how local representatives engage with this and in so doing how they refine and define national policy.

These conclusions are ‘the *formulation* of understanding’ (Pratt 2003 p. 29) that has arisen through my role of researcher and I am seeking to share such understanding through this thesis and subsequent journal articles. At the same time I acknowledge that as a practitioner my aim has been ‘the *utilisation* of understanding’ (Pratt 2003 p. 29) in order to effect change in my own context. It is to this latter perspective I now wish to turn.

### **Influence of the research on my professional development**

The research process, including data collection and particularly data analysis and writing, has given me space to reflect on my attitudes and values. During the process of undertaking the research and thinking about the information and the data that I collected, I believe my contribution as a professional has been changing. I have been confronted through this process with the way in which I exercise power and influence in my work and indeed in various other situations. In particular I have become more aware of how potential issues fail to be discussed in order to suppress potential conflict. Although much of what occurs in these contexts happens quickly and often without much thought, I am at least aware on reflection what I have done and have sought to control the more negative aspects of these actions.

The whole research project has provided a reminder to me that in my research and in my professional work I am 'vulnerable to ethical dilemmas' which encompass a wide range of sensitive factors such as 'personal disclosure, exchange, trust and the building of relationships' (Ozga and Gewirtz 1994 p. 133).

*Enabling those being consulted to be heard*

As part of this Conclusion I wish briefly to consider the approaches that I as a representative of the LEA might take to ameliorate the negative aspects of micropolitical activity. Levin (2001 p. 128) has indicated it is essential to be involved in the policy process with a strong set of commitments and with a relatively open mind as to how these commitments could best be fulfilled. Macpherson (1996) has suggested that those contributing to the policy process should be open to informed discussion about education, irrespective of their starting position and values:

For leaders to claim they are educative means they must be able to maintain a climate that promotes inquiry, values problem solving, welcomes criticism, and encourages participation and learning about organisations. Openness to criticism and an ability to learn from mistakes becomes the basis for more valuable leadership action and cycles of reflection and decision-making (p.103).

I do not underestimate the Herculean scope of this task for those in the LEA and myself, in view of the influence that some interest groups would wish to exercise.

As individuals and groups have increasing expectations that they will contribute to the policy process and decision-making, and indeed have been encouraged to make of these contributions, Elected Members and officers such as myself are having to pay more attention to public opinion and the views of particular stakeholders. One aspect of this has been how to respond to conflict; frequently:

conflict has been regarded as a symptom to be managed rather than a reflection of the deeper issues that may have gone unexamined or been silenced (Blase and Anderson 1995 p. 12).

This may be seen in the reactions of the special school headteachers to the possible closure of some special schools as an outcome of the SEN Action Plan. Although opportunities for collaboration and participation might be arranged, these opportunities do not necessarily ensure that participants from a range of constituencies will be heard:

Participation continues to be limited, not by overt manipulation, but rather by a failure to understand the importance of such factors as social class and gender. Power over others can operate through an apparent "consensus" rather than through "coercion" (Blase and Anderson 1995 p. 137).

Although the following comments from Levin (2001) refer to the influence on and of central government, in the light of my research I would hold that they are relevant to myself in local government. In some contentious areas where influence is unequal, 'increasing debate just adds noise and confusion for most people' (p. 193) whilst disguising the objectives of Elected Members and officers. People are pushed:

to do things even if those things are not in their interest ...It would be both incorrect and naïve to suggest that we are marching steadily towards some utopia of political participation (Levin 2001 p. 193).

Therefore, in order to engage productively with the members of interest groups, representatives of the LEA, like myself, will need a greater level of 'micropolitical literacy' tempered by an adherence to the fundamental value of respect for persons, as a safeguard against introducing more effective approaches to 'silence' opposition to proposals.

Yeatman (1994 p. 110) has argued for the creation of spaces between the deliverers and the users of services with a more participatory approach to decision-making. Part of this approach has the aim of ensuring that differences between groups do not become inequalities. Giddens (1994b) has also promoted 'generative politics' based on the development of trust, which 'seeks to allow individuals and groups to make things happen, rather than have things happen to them' (p. 15). There certainly are challenges which might release reactionary as well as progressive approaches as identified by Hatcher (1996 p. 55), however, the commitment to participatory

democracy would be a principle worth pursuing in its own right by those such as myself involved in managing consultations.

In addition there are difficulties in promoting the 'politics of recognition or an ethics of otherness' which avoids practising the 'power of control' upon others (Gewirtz 1998 p. 476). In effect:

an ethic of otherness and a politics of recognition [would] provide an ethical and practical basis for relationships marked by a celebration and respect of difference and mutuality (Gewirtz 1998 p. 477).

Establishing arrangements which afford sufficient opportunities for representation which permit meaningful debate is no easy task. However, my research throws some light on the balance that could be struck between the actions that are taken by officers like myself who manage aspects of the policy process and those who contribute their views as stakeholders through appropriate mature consultations.

Although there are indications in my research that there has been dialogue between Elected Members and officers with stakeholders in the local communities, there could be two inter-related challenges. The first, to encourage participatory partnerships and the second, to generate shared knowledge, rather than having a top down application of political and professional expertise. As regards the first, although there is a commitment on the part of Elected Members and officers to engage in partnership working, there can be a tension as the representatives of the LEA have to accommodate the expectations of their partners. In regard to promoting shared knowledge, I have indicated this may be easier to achieve in some policy areas such as broad planning to raise pupil achievement, and more difficult in areas which relate to the education of children who are considered vulnerable. Perhaps one step would be for Members and officers who are taking the lead in aspects of the policy process, to engage in further reflection about their intentions and the outcomes of their actions and actively seek feedback from participants to inform this reflection. I do not underestimate the enormity of the task for both Members and officers. By the nature of their positions, the LEA representatives normally have clear and reasoned

arguments for seeking to achieve particular goals; engaging in such reflection could appear as a sign of prevarication. Perhaps they could consider how they might find ways of using language to create social relationships characterised by consensus and agreement (Habermas 1979 cited in Quicke 2000 p. 305). However, as I have indicated in Chapter 5, this is going to require an awareness that some groups can be excluded from the mechanisms which mask domination as identified by Fraser (1994 p. 79) and that non-rational decision-making is an important feature of micropolitical activity. In the attempt to convince by rational argument, understanding would need to be nurtured through collaborative participatory partnerships which would facilitate active debate and would be valued by all parties. Such partnerships have been proposed by Cook and Swain (2001 p. 197) in which sovereignty was shared but not surrendered. At the same time the negative uses of power and influence such as manipulation would need to be put aside.

A high risk strategy and one realistically which would be difficult to achieve, would be for Members and officers to consider Gergen's(1992) proposals of encouraging disruption to conventional thinking in an organisation and to encourage 'alien realities' (p. 223) to ensure the organisation maintained its links with its environment. In relation to schools, Fullan (1993 p. 39) has called for connection with the wider environment and for non-experts as well as experts to be involved in introducing change. Breaking down the barriers of an organisation by accepting the views of those outside the organisation or those who are not managers within can have benefits. In similar vein Giroux and McLaren (1994 cited in Hartley 1998 p. 159) have advocated that the voices of the marginalised should be heard and the privileged meanings which have been considered as received organisational wisdom should be questioned. However, the danger is that:

this could lead to their co-option or to their neutralisation. And management may seek safe and agreeable 'dissenters', perhaps giving them functional (but separate) autonomy, within an organisation, seen but sidelined (Hartley 1998 p. 159).

As a consequence dissent might be managed, and could not be justified as meaningful consultation; rather it could represent the beginning of what

Coates (1995) calls a 'post modern means to a modernist end' (cited in Hartley 1998 p. 161).

As a LEA officer and as a researcher using some of the tools provided by critical policy analysis I have been helped to understand how power is exercised in local politics and in management. This has been demonstrated for instance through the way in which agendas have been set, and how dominant interests have had the material resources and the ability to think and plan to advance their particular views. From my research I would suggest that those people like myself who are engaged with the policy process would find advantages in setting goals which are realistic and achievable and sufficiently flexible to accommodate negotiation. I recognise that Elected Members may find this more difficult to achieve than officers because the former are likely to have election pledges to fulfil.

Throughout this inquiry I have sought to understand which actors have achieved positions of influence and power and how their domination has been maintained, all factors which are identified by Scribner *et al.* (1994 p. 208). By considering the complexity of micropolitical activity in the policy process (Gillborn 1994 p. 147) I have developed a more informed view of the processes of social change. At the very least I have become more aware of how the adverse effects of the exercise of power can extend social inequalities.

#### *Becoming more equipped to fulfil my role*

In this research I have sought to ensure the data that I have used has been credible and that the conclusions I have drawn have been plausible. Such an approach has enabled me to take steps to recognise my own limitations in thinking and the weaknesses of my views, also identified by Willower (1997 p. 449), and how my actions do not always reflect the fundamental values which I espouse. Through the research process I have been helped to acquire an approach to puzzle matters through and to have more well-rounded insights.

The opportunities to engage in the type of reflection I have just described have proved to be key components to the development of insights into my own professionalism in the education service. The process has been one of a search for meaning in both the data and my professional work and it has become a powerful personal experience, as identified also by Waters-Adams (1994 p. 197). It has also been a time to consider the nature of my attitudes and values, a conclusion drawn also by O'Hanlon (1994 p. 283). Thinking about these matters has enabled me to have a better understanding about others and myself (see also Gadamer 1975 cited in Halliday 2002 p. 54). Overall this has been part of an educational process which has contributed to 'self-formation' (Seddon 1996 p. 202). This has not been a lonely path which I have trod on my own, for I have benefited from the wise counsel of my supervisors – the 'intersubjective discourse' (Waters-Adams 1994 p. 197); or 'collaborators' with whom to pursue meaning (Winter 1987 p. 10). This approach has been in line with the current trend in ethnographic interpretation and representation where the researcher is engaged in some inward self-reflexive examination of his or her role, as identified by Gerstl-Pepin and Gunzenhauser (2002 p. 137). Habermas (1974) refers to the emancipation of the individual, indicating that from self-reflection, understanding emerges which in turn liberates a person from dogmatic dependence (cited in O'Hanlon 1994 p. 285).

I have begun to move beyond the specific expertise arising from this research and to engage with the 'swampy lowland' of practice and its problems and complexities (Schön 1987 p. 3). Further through:

self and social questioning (reflexivity) [I believe I have begun]  
to engage with and (en)counter – be affected by but also affect  
– contemporary uncertainties (Edwards *et al.* 2002 p. 527).

As such I am seeking to develop the qualities of the 'new professional' (Quicke 2000 p. 203).

An element of caution is required in this discussion of reflective practice. Such reflection from the research process might allow us to 'catch ourselves



in the act of living in the world' (Watson and Wilcox 2000 p. 58), however, it is salutary to be reminded by Hartley that although reflexivity might:

purport to free us – to lead us to self-awareness, authenticity and fulfilment – it does no such thing. It only appears to free us, for with our freedom we choose to become complicit in, or to have a sense of ownership of, the political, economic and social structures of our time (Hartley 1998 p. 158).

Thus I have become more aware that although reflection arising from this research has had an influence on my role as a manager where I have had opportunities to influence policy, there is an expectation that I will use this self knowledge to become a more effective modernist manager. However, I have had the view confirmed that 'a rationalistic, consensual goal-oriented model of organisations can only be an ideal' (Hoyle 1986 p. 55). This conclusion is not in accord with the framework promulgated by the central government and other agencies as outlined in Chapter 2, although the conclusion is consistent with the theoretical framework that I have explored in the previous two chapters devoted to data analysis.

### **New dimensions and new opportunities to exercise power and influence in a LEA**

During the time I have been engaged with this research there have been major changes as a result of the Local Government Act (2000) to the way in which councils have organised themselves to process their business. The traditional committee system of the Council, with its origins in the 19th Century, which was in operation during the time that the first versions of the Plans under consideration were drafted, has disappeared. With the introduction of the modernising agenda of local government a clearer distinction has been drawn between the executive and scrutiny functions of Elected Members.

Updated versions of the Plans are continuing to be produced and although I have not undertaken any formal collection of data it would appear that there has been little change in either the influence of central government or the role of elites in the LEA in shaping policy. It is evident from my observation of the

new administrative changes that micropolitical activity is just as prevalent as that operating in the previous committee system. The context might have changed but the motivation to control is still unmistakable. Indeed there are indications that 'varying ideologies and personal idiosyncrasies' (Daws 1995 p. 129 cited in Taylor *et al.* 1997) of the Executive may have even greater influence in the policy. This would confirm the conclusions drawn by Bacharach and Mundell (1995) that:

micropolitics is not defined by its context, but rather by its nature. That is micropolitics (at all levels) involves the strategic contests among interest groups over different logics of action (p. 432 cited in Blase and Blase 2002 p. 9).

There are also some aspects of my research that have relevance to the new arrangements. The first is that some stakeholders e.g. some parent groups, continue to feel that their views were still being marginalised. Second, some key stakeholders such as headteachers and governors continue to seek to influence the senior Elected Members who have the most influence over policy – in the past these were the Chairmen of various committees, now they are the Cabinet Members or local Elected Members with a scrutiny role of the Executive's policies and decisions or contribute to policy development. Third, officers still have a major role in advising the respective Cabinet Members and influencing the policy agenda.

### **Closing remarks**

It would be productive to undertake further research into the influence of micropolitical activity on shaping and refining central government policy within the modernised constitutional arrangements where Elected Members are openly seeking greater control of the management of the LEA. This would serve both as a comparison to my research and provide an insight into the changing relationships of LEA representatives and stakeholders. However, within the education service I would not expect the production of any other Plan to be more potentially contentious than that required for the development of special educational provision. There are, however, other

examples of Plans and policies e.g. waste disposal, where there is a clear party political divide which could be significant.

Another possible line of analysis which could be productive would be to deconstruct the texts of each of the Plans in order to highlight how policies and the content and language of policy documents can be shaped by economic, social, and political contexts. Discourse theory would provide an opportunity to explore the historical context and how some key concepts have been used in the policies.

My research could have some interest to those who are working in LEAs as well as those who are fulfilling other functions in local government, as they reflect on how micropolitical activity can influence policy. I recognise that there may be difficulties in maintaining the confidentiality of the interviewees and the sensitivity of some of the subject matter. Nonetheless I hope the research might contribute to further discussion on the macro-micro debate. An article in a national journal could raise the awareness of those in the public, private and voluntary sectors of how to encourage openness in their networks of relationships and especially with those who were being consulted. I think it would also be important to write a short article for managers in the LEA in which I work setting out my conclusions and encouraging them to reflect on their practice. In view of the fact that the process and the outcomes of my research have surprised me (cf. Griffiths 1998 p.130 cited in Halliday 2002 p. 52), I hope I will be able to convey some of this in my future writing in this area.

The themes arising from this research are indicative of the micropolitical processes that go on in a LEA and how policy evolves, confirming the complexity of the policy process and the multidimensional nature of power.

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## **ANNEX 1 SUMMARY INFORMATION ABOUT THE STATUTORY PLANS THAT LEAS ARE REQUIRED TO PRODUCE AND WHICH ARE THE BASIS OF THIS RESEARCH**

### **Introduction**

Before going into detail about the respective Plans I wish to provide some general comments about the Plans and place them within a conceptual framework.

The Plans demonstrate an emphasis by central government on the specification and monitoring of standards (Gewirtz 2002 p. 157). The Plans have encapsulated in textual form the policy of a particular area and an approach to the implementation of the policy, as identified by Ranson (1995b p. 437). Within the Plans the LEA codified and publicised the values which were to inform future practice and therefore encapsulated the arrangements for change. Policies projected images of the ideal (Ball 1990b p.22) whilst the Plans were contextualised statements and were focused on change and action, demonstrating publicly a commitment to transforming practice according to ideal values (Ranson 1995b p. 440).

The Plans were prepared, as required, to challenge systematically the assumptions and practices of the LEA and the education service in a number of ways. The following is adapted from Ranson (1995b):

- i) to focus on future orientation rather than inherited routine and tradition;
- ii) to be systematic rather than incremental ad hoc;
- iii) to be based on explicit analysis rather than the implicit and unexamined;
- iv) to incorporate the thought through rather than muddling through;
- v) to focus on the dynamism of change rather than stability;
- vi) to be the proactive rather than the active.

The Plans have been premised on the basis that those at local level have the capacity to shape policy through Plans and through them to adapt the policy

to local circumstances. These Plans have been based on a rational approach requiring a set of chronological steps which include problem definition, clarification of values goals and objectives; identification of options to achieve goals; cost/benefit analysis of options; selection of courses of action; evaluation of the course of action; and modification to the programme. In practice, as my research shows, it was not possible to identify and separate out these elements so clearly, although in the final versions of the Plans the sections reflect these steps; indeed my research has indicated that the policy process is more complex than rational models would suggest (Taylor *et al.* 1997 pp. 24-5).

It is not my purpose to explore how these Plans have been implemented suffice it to say that different interests groups have sought to acquire influence over the purposes and resources of the Plans.

### **Education Development Plan (EDP)**

In addition to the general duties, the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 requires LEAs to fulfil specific duties to further the aim of school improvement. The most important of these is the requirement for an LEA to prepare an EDP for its area and such further Plans as may be required under section 6 (1) of the 1998 Act. The Plan requires the approval of the Secretary of State.

The LEA is able in the Plan to make a statement of proposals, including the funding, to develop the provision of education for children in an area by raising standards and improving the performance of schools. The LEA can shape the direction of the local curriculum using the EDP under section 6 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.

An EDP must consist of:

- a) a statement setting out the LEA's proposals for developing the provision of education for children in its area, whether by

- i) raising standards of education provided for such children, whether at schools maintained by the LEA or otherwise than at school; or
  - ii) improving the performance of such schools; and
- b) annexes to that statement.

Both of these sections must contain the material prescribed by the Education Development Plans (England) Regulations 1999, SI 1999/138.

<b>Section of 1998 Act</b>	<b>Provision</b>
6(2) and (5)	The EDP may contain such other information as the LEA considers relevant
6(6)	In preparing the EDP, the LEA must have regard to the education of children with special educational needs
6(7)	In preparing the EDP, the LEA must consult the governing body and headteacher of every school maintained by the LEA, the appropriate diocesan authorities and anyone else it considers should be consulted
6(9)	To assist in the preparation of EDPs, the Secretary of State has issued guidance to which the LEA must have regard. This guidance is found in the Code of Practice on LEA-School Relations (paras. 35 to 38).
7	There are procedures for the Secretary of State to approve, modify or reject the Plan. The LEA must publish the EDP in accordance with Regulations, if it is approved or approved with modifications.

### **Early Years Development and Childcare Plan**

The statutory basis underpinning Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships and Plans is contained in sections 117 to 124 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.

The Government announced its broad policy approach to early years services in May 1997. The key element of the policy is that early years services should be planned in each local authority area through an Early Years Development Plan, drawn up by the local authority in full co-operation

with a body which represents all the relevant early years interests in the area. These bodies were initially called Early Years Development Partnerships. All local authorities set up Partnerships in 1997 and in February 1998 submitted these partnerships to the Secretary of State for approval.

On 19 May 1998, the Government published a Green Paper on establishing a National Childcare Strategy covering children from 0 - 14 years (DfEE 1998b). Acknowledging the vital links between care and education, especially in the early years, the Green Paper proposed that the national strategy should be planned and delivered by local childcare partnerships, building on the existing Partnerships, each of which would thus become an Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership. It further proposed that Plans should be extended to cover childcare, becoming Early Years Development and Childcare Plans. The Government's guiding principles, outlined in the National Childcare Strategy, for the future developments of early years and childcare services are: quality, affordability, diversity, accessibility and partnership.

The following are references to Part V of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998. Also relevant are the Education (Nursery Education and Early Years Development) (England) Regulations 1999, SI 1999/1329.

<b>Section of 1998 Act</b>	<b>Provision</b>
119(1)	It is the responsibility of the LEA to establish a partnership for its area. In carrying this out, the LEA is one of a number of members of the wider group promoting effective partnership working and supporting that work through management of the resources attached to the planning mechanisms.
119(2)	The LEA must have regard to any guidance by the Secretary of State in establishing the partnership and determining its constitution.
119(3)	The LEA also has the power to establish a sub-committee of the partnership for any part of its area.
119(4)	Responsibility for convening, servicing and facilitating meetings and proceedings of the partnership is the duty of the LEA.

<b>Section of 1998 Act</b>	<b>Provision</b>
119(5)	The partnership, in conjunction with the LEA, has a duty to review the sufficiency of nursery education in the area, and to prepare the Early Years Development and Childcare Plan.
119(6)	The Secretary of State may confer on partnerships additional functions, which may impact on the LEA to action or facilitate.
120(1)	It is the duty of the LEA to prepare the Early Years Development Plan and develop further such Plans, in conjunction with the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership.
120(2)-(4)	Prescribe what the development plan should comprise; there are detailed guidance documents as to its content and format.
121(1)	The LEA has a duty to submit the plan by a specified date to the Secretary of State for approval.
121(3)	The Secretary of State may require modifications to the plan. It is the duty of the LEA to implement an approved plan.
121(8)	The LEA has the power, with the agreement of the partnership, to submit modifications of an approved plan to the Secretary of State for approval.
121(9)	The LEA shall publish the plan in a way which may be prescribed.

### **Behaviour Support Plan**

Section 9 of the Education Act 1997 (inserted as section 527A of the Education Act 1996) requires publication of the LEA's statement setting out the authority's arrangements for the education of children with behaviour difficulties. The Local Education Authority (Behaviour Support Plans) Regulations 1998, SI 1998/644, include requirements for the publication of the Plan and its revisions, and prescribe publication of revisions triennially.

Section of 1996 Act	Provision
527A(1)	The arrangements that must be covered by the statement include
19	a) arrangements made or to be made by the LEA for the provision of advice and resources to schools maintained by the LEA, and other arrangements made or to be made by it with a view to (i) meeting requests by such schools for support and assistance in connection with the promotion of good behaviour and discipline on the part of their pupils; and (ii) assisting such schools to deal with general behavioural problems and the behavioural difficulties of individual pupils;
527A(2)	b) the arrangements made or to be made by the LEA for the provision of suitable education at school or otherwise than at school for those children of compulsory school age who may not receive such education unless such arrangements are made for them;
	c) other arrangements made or to be made by it for assisting children with behavioural difficulties to find places at suitable schools.
527A(3)	The statement should also deal with the interaction between these arrangements and the arrangements made by the LEA for children with special educational needs.
527A(4) and (5)	The statement must be prepared following consultation prescribed by the Secretary of State and, once produced, must be published as and when prescribed by Regulations. The Regulations shall also make provision for when and how the statement needs to be revised.
527A(6)	In preparing the Behaviour Support Plan and implementing it, LEAs must have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State.

The relevant provisions can be found in the Local Education Authority (Behaviour Support Plans) Regulations 1998, SI 1998/644. Thus, in the course of preparing the statement (known as a Behaviour Support Plan), the LEA must consult the headteacher and governing body of every maintained school and the teacher in charge and, where in place, the management committee of Pupil Referral Units, trade unions and persons representing teachers and staff other than teachers employed in the LEA's schools,

parents' representatives, further education principals, the Director of Social Services, every diocesan authority, health authority, probation committee, Chief Constable, careers service organisation, TEC (LSC) and clerk to the justices, together with representatives of voluntary organisations working with disaffected children and young persons within its area (regulation 3).

Every consultee should receive a draft of the plan and a letter containing prescribed information as to what the consultee is being asked to do.

Once the plan has been produced, it must be made available for inspection by members of the public at public libraries and such other places as may be reasonable. Copies must also be sent to the Secretary of State, the Chief Inspector and every consultee as well as to anyone else who asks for one (Regulation 4). Guidance was contained in DfEE Circular 1/98 LEA Behaviour Support Plans.

### **Special Educational Needs Action Plan**

Each LEA is responsible in accordance with section 315 of the Education Act 1996 to keep under review its arrangements for special educational provision. The LEA must have regard to the Revised SEN Code (DfE 1994)<sup>1</sup>. It must also, to the extent that it appears necessary or desirable for the purpose of co-ordinating provision for children with special educational needs, consult the governing bodies of maintained schools in the LEA's area.

Specifically, the LEA's Special Educational Needs Action Plan was produced in response to the challenges laid out by central government in 'Meeting Special Educational Needs: a programme of action' (DfEE 1998a). This was preceded in October 1997 by a Green Paper on SEN which stated:

We want to see more pupils with SEN included within mainstream primary and secondary schools. We support the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Salamanca World Statement on Special

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<sup>1</sup> Replaced by the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice in 2001 (DfES 2001b)



Educational Needs 1994. This calls on governments to adopt the principle of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools, unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise. This implies a progressive extension of the capacity of mainstream schools to provide for children with a wide range of needs (DfEE 1997a p. 14).

The government aligned the inclusion agenda with the broader issues of the civil rights of disabled people (Disability Rights Task Force 1999). The government also aimed to associate the liberal agenda in special educational needs provision with the more wide-ranging concern for the impact of social and economic disadvantage as part of its 'social inclusion' agenda outlined in speeches made by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Blunkett 1999a; 1999b).

The commitment to inclusion had a number of provisos in the Green Paper (DfEE 1997a); by the time the Programme of Action was issued there were even more qualifications to this policy. Thus:

promoting inclusion within mainstream schools where parents want it and appropriate support can be provided, will remain a cornerstone of our strategy...Our approach will be practical, not dogmatic, and will put the needs of individual children first ...For some children, a mainstream placement may not be right, or not right just yet. We therefore confirm that specialist provision - often but not always in special schools - will continue to play a vital role (DfEE 1998a p. 23).

## **ANNEX 2 OUTLINE OF THE STAGES IN PRODUCING THE STATUTORY AND STRATEGIC PLANS**

The preparations associated with each of the four Plans had their own unique contexts.

### **Education Development Plan**

The EDP was prepared in the context where the LEA had limited involvement in practice in school improvement in a significant number of the schools in its administrative area, particularly those which had obtained foundation status. The overall achievements of pupils in schools in the administrative area were just beginning to be comparable to the national averages and with the LEA's statistical neighbours<sup>1</sup>.

The EDP was a three year plan from 1999 to 2002. Officers made an assessment of the statutory requirements. A framework was prepared for consulting stakeholders widely, in particular headteachers and governors. The extensive consultation process commenced in the summer of 1998 through Newslines (information sheets) for schools, area meetings for headteachers of primary, secondary and special schools, seminars for governors and Members and was repeated in the autumn. It resulted in a significant consensus around four priority areas. Officers considered the outcome of discussions with stakeholders. An Advisory Group comprising representative headteachers, governors and the teachers' professional associations was established which could challenge officer conclusions and drafts. The Group met four times from the summer 1998. (It was from this Group that I selected some of my interviewees for this thesis.) There was further wide consultation with schools on the summary plan. The Education Committee considered, and the Council finally approved the final version early in 1999; this was sent to the Secretary of State for approval. Focus

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<sup>1</sup> These are the ten other county councils which were most similar in their socio and economic composition, as defined by OFSTED, to the LEA in my study.

groups were established during the early spring of 1999 to review the proposed resourcing of the EDP.

### **Early Years Development and Childcare Plan**

The Early Years Plan was set within the context of a relatively low level of provision for three year olds in 1998. The Council's coalition administration before 1998 had identified additional resources to establish nursery classes in mainstream schools. However, the establishment of a Conservative administration early in 1998, resulted in a change of focus to ensure there were sufficient places for four year-olds in maintained settings in accordance with central government policy. The introduction of vouchers for four year-olds by the previous Conservative government had ensured diversity of provision resulting in the private and voluntary sectors becoming key suppliers of early years education. The experience which the LEA had developed of working with these sectors to provide sufficient places was extended to include childcare provision and the production of the Early Years Development and Childcare Plan.

The first Early Years Development and Childcare Plan outlined provision for 1998 to 2001 mainly for children under eight years of age, with a particular focus on those under five years of age; it also highlighted the development of childcare facilities. Officers made an assessment of the legal requirements of the Plan. The Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership entered into detailed discussions on the content of the Plan. Officers prepared a draft Plan and consulted with the Partnership to prepare a final version. The Education Committee approved this Plan which was submitted to central government.

### **Behaviour Support Plan**

The Behaviour Support Plan was prepared against a background of increasing exclusions and pressures on the children and adolescent mental health services. Links in particular were developing with Social Services and

the Health Service in the Council's area. The LEA had already introduced pupil referral units (PRUs) providing off-site education provision and early intervention strategies for Key Stage 3 students. The staff of the PRUs also provided outreach services on behaviour management to many secondary schools. Multi-disciplinary teams were providing support to primary schools in two areas of the LEA with some of the most significant social and economic needs. There were also two PRUs and associated local facilities providing education to students who had been excluded from school or who had medical conditions.

This was a three year Plan for 1998-2001. Officers made an assessment of the legal requirements of the Plan. An Advisory Group agreed a timeline and consultation procedure for the Plan. In April 1998 a paper outlining the position was sent to all schools and representatives of related agencies including colleges, statutory agencies and voluntary bodies as outlined in Circular 1/98 (DfEE 1998c). Written responses to this paper, or participation in one of three consultative sessions were invited. Written and verbal responses were collated during the summer 1998. A draft of the Plan was drawn up and submitted to schools and the same agencies involved in the first consultation phase for further comment. There was overwhelming support for the Plan in the second round of consultations. Consequently the draft version remained largely unchanged and formed the substance of the final Plan which was approved by Members of the Education Committee and was published in January 1999. This Plan was submitted to central government.

### **Special Educational Needs Action Plan**

There was a trend to increasing the placement of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools in accord with the principles of the Education Act 1996. The proportion of children with statements of special educational needs was comparatively low compared to other LEAs. Since the LEA's policy statement for special educational needs indicated that children should be integrated into mainstream schools, the SEN Action Plan

explored the concept of inclusion and as a consequence, how it was expected the number of special schools would decline.

This Plan was constructed over a three phase consultation process carried out between January and September 1999 before being adopted by Elected Members. Officers made an assessment of the requirements of the Programme of Action (DfEE 1998a) published in November 1998, following the Green Paper of 1997 (DfEE 1997a). In November 1998 Members decided in the light of the Government's new agenda to undertake a review of special educational needs across the county and identify specific actions to be undertaken to take forward these issues. In January 1999 a paper (X County Council 1999) was circulated internally to Social Services, and externally to all governors, headteachers, and representatives of other agencies such as the Health Services and voluntary organisations. Written responses were invited under five theme headings and a series of focus groups was held for representatives to discuss the themes further and submit their collective views. In addition a questionnaire inviting responses to Inclusion was sent to all parents of children with statements of special educational need in the County. A small selection of children were interviewed. Feedback from this phase was collated, summarised and sent back to all former consultees during March 1999.

The first stage of the consultation process elicited anxiety in some quarters over the implications and pace of moves towards greater inclusion. Because of the anxieties raised amongst some parents, the Director of Learning Services wrote to them to allay their fears and to reassure them that progress could only be made on the basis of parental confidence.

It was considered important to establish whether the analysis of the feedback to phase one in the consultation process was broadly accurate and did indeed reflect local views. It was also considered vital to gain some agreement about which of the identified pointers for action should be prioritised in the ensuing Action Plan. The response to these questions

formed phase two of the consultation process and were collated and summarised by an independent consultant.

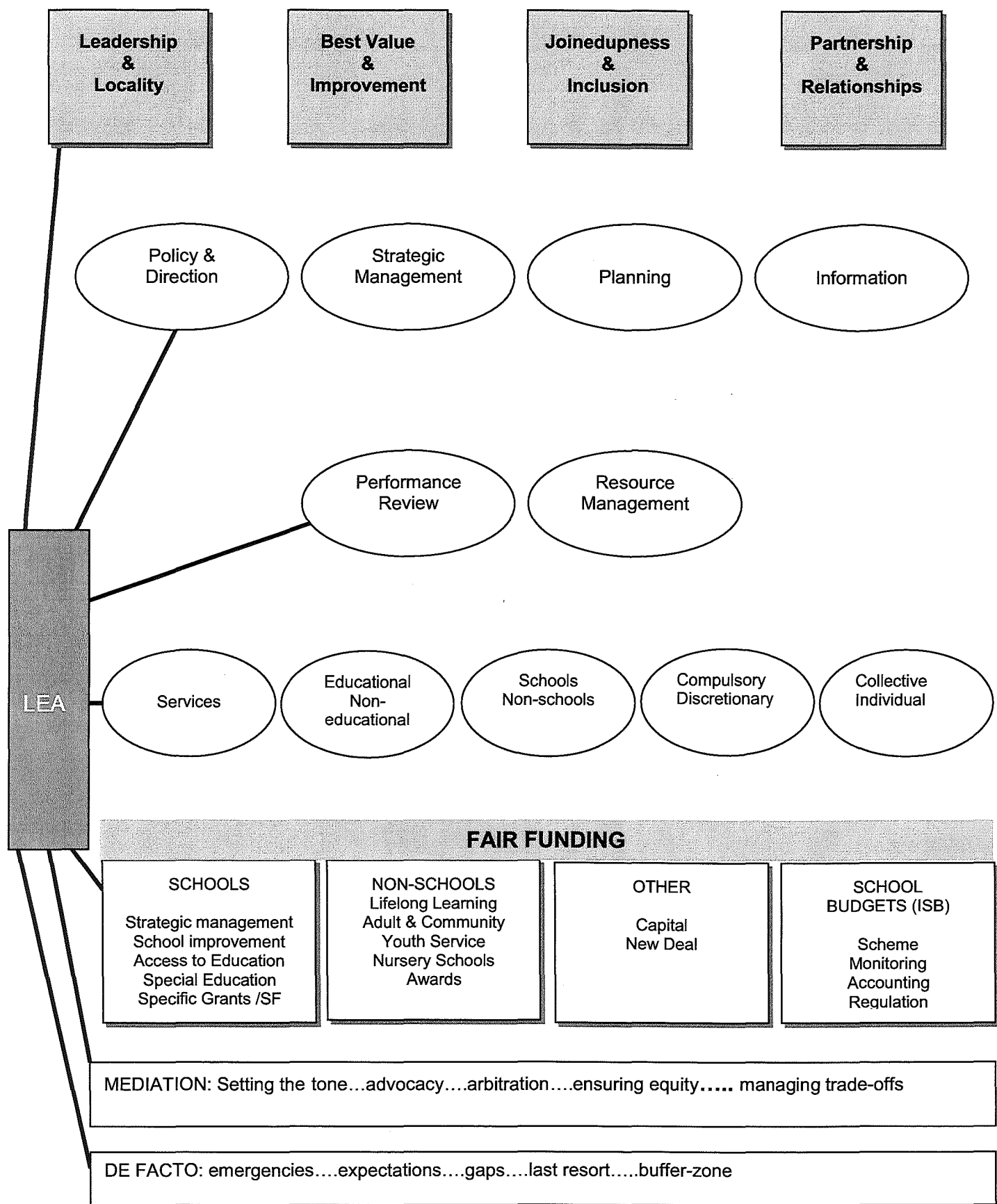
In July 1999 in the final phase of the consultation process, a draft Action Plan was circulated to all schools and representatives of other agencies; responses were requested by the end of September. Parents of children with statements of SEN were sent a draft of the Action Plan with a response sheet and were provided with a full version on request.

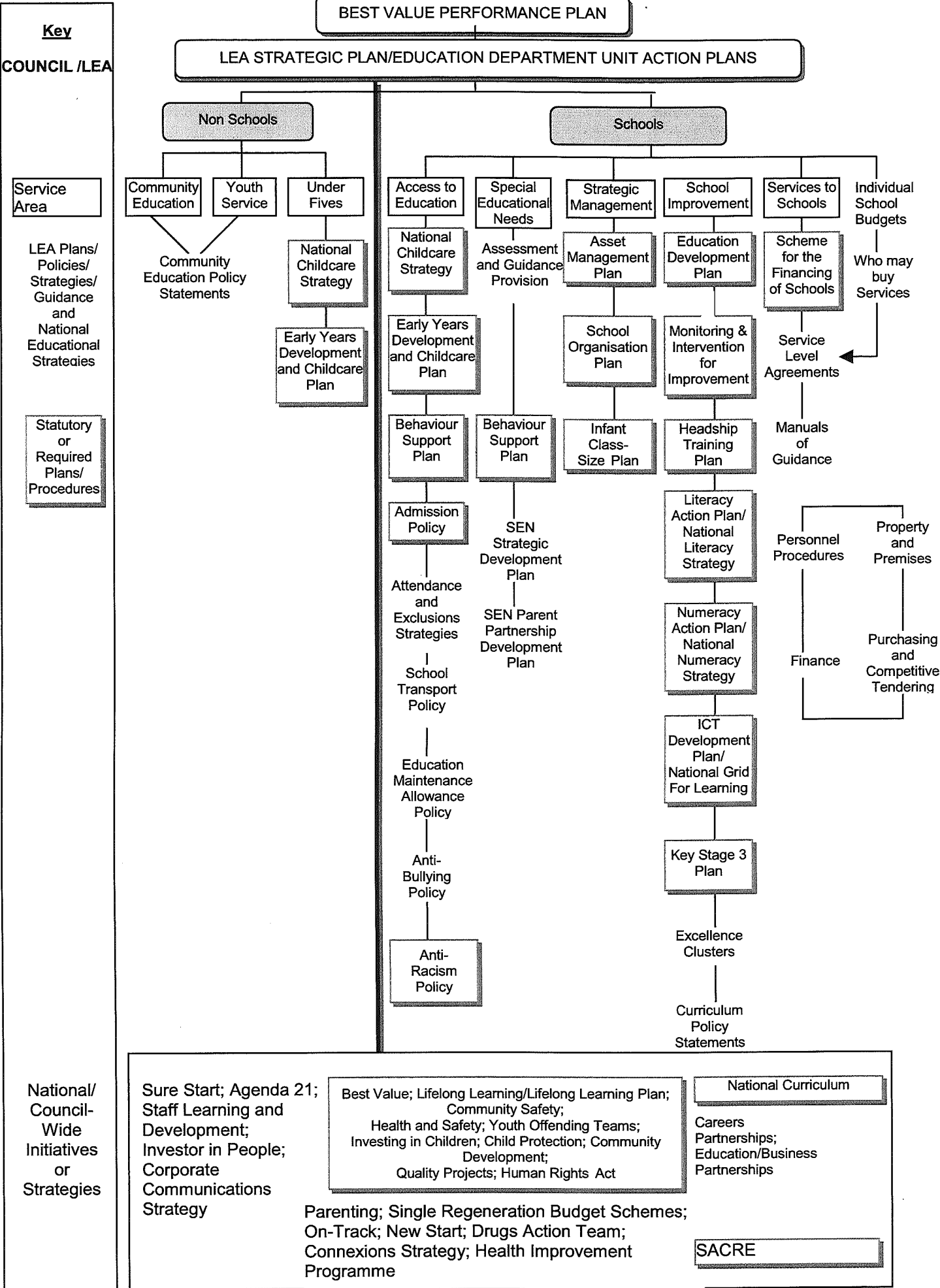
The Education Committee's Special Educational Needs Panel meeting in private considered these responses and agreed a number of amendments to the draft Action Plan which was endorsed by the Education Committee. In its final form it was a three year Plan from 1999 to 2002 and outlined future implications within a five and a ten year framework. This Plan was submitted to central government.

ANNEX 3

THE OVERALL LOCAL AUTHORITY ROLE

(Adapted from Whitbourn *et al* 2000 p. 3)







## **ANNEX 5**

### **BRIEF DETAILS OF THE INTERVIEWEES.**

Biographical factors of the interviewees were part of the context of my research, providing the backcloth to the discussion I have entered into with regard to micropolitical activity and to the influence of agency and structure. The participants assumed particular functions and roles; some worked within professional codes and others were motivated by a range of values. For instance Brighouse (2002) has indicated that 'to be an *elected member* of an LEA where you happen to be a Councillor matters both at a particular time and over time' (p. 193).

All of the interviewees were active in the education service and all had become experts to some degree and could use their knowledge in the policy process. Each interviewee was familiar with contributing to debate and discussion; this enabled him/her to make effective contributions to the policy process, where so much depended on the ability to put forward reasoned views. Such experience was a key feature of the roles of Councillors, officers, governors, headteachers (who all represented their respective associations), the union representative, and the director of the parents' voluntary group; the parent who chaired a support group was confident and articulate in presenting her views.

The references at the beginning of each biographical summary are used in the body of the thesis to identify the respective respondent and her/his comments.

#### **Parents – voluntary experts**

**(P1)** A director of a parents' support group serving the County. She had previous experience in personnel management, the health service and establishing toddler and playgroups, as well as Chair of Home Start. She felt that the 'independent' views of her organisation should be represented: 'our view is that however good a service is, people making difficult choices will always look for a second opinion'.

**(P2)** A parent who had two children at mainstream schools and a child with special educational needs in a special school. She had been chairperson of a local parents' support group and in her words continued to give voice to 'those parents that cannot speak for themselves'. She felt she had been cast in this role, partly because of her ability to frame a cogent argument and to express it clearly. She was not initially invited by the LEA to the consultation meetings relating to the SEN Action Plan. She, like other parents, was able to respond via a questionnaire to the proposals of the Plan, however, she was not randomly selected to meet with Councillors and officers as part of a focus group. She only later became directly involved when specific proposals arising from the Plan were being put forward to make changes to the organisation of the special school attended by her child. The headteacher of her child's school identified her as 'as being somebody whose opinions would be valued from a committee meeting basis'.

#### **Councillors – paid/voluntary experts**

**(C1)** A senior Conservative Councillor who had been Chairman of the Education Committee, a representative on the Social Services Committee, and a school governor for 27 years. She felt that greater collaboration between Social Services and Education would be advantageous. She recognised that Councillors had to exercise leadership within the Council.

**(C2)** A senior Labour Councillor who had been Chairman of the Education Committee, a representative on the Social Services Committee, a school governor for 30 years and a District Councillor. She felt that greater collaboration between Social Services and Education would be advantageous.

**(C3)** A senior Liberal Democrat Councillor who had a background in higher and further education, an education adviser for UNESCO, and had joined UNICEF. He had been Chairman of the Education Committee, was a Borough Councillor and a governor of two primary schools. This Councillor

demonstrated that roles were not always planned for he became Chairman of the Education Committee after his predecessor lost his seat at the local elections in 1997. Subsequently, as a result of his Chairmanship, he played a more extensive and direct role in the development of the Plans than he might have expected.

### **Officers – paid experts**

**(O1)** Assistant Director of Education with a responsibility for strategic development of the education service. He had over 19 years in a senior position within the LEA and over 30 years experience in the education service. This officer assumed responsibility for managing the development of the EDP after the previous lead officer resigned from the LEA. He therefore fulfilled a more extensive and direct role in the development of the EDP than he might have expected considering his overall responsibilities.

**(O2)** A senior manager with 25 years experience in education and currently with a responsibility for special educational needs; he was also a chartered educational psychologist.

**(O3)** A senior manager with responsibility for the development of early years and childcare services. She had previous experience as a childminder, running a playgroup, a trainer within the voluntary sector, and an advisor for under 5s services in Social Services. She was identified by 'happenstance' to serve on the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership as she, along with one other colleague, were the only two officers within the LEA with the necessary expertise to contribute to the planning process.

**(O4)** A senior officer involved in the development of special education provision. Her previous experience was teaching in primary and secondary schools where she became a special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO). She became involved in the SEN Action Plan as part of an 'evolutionary' process. She had assisted with managing the consultations for the Behaviour Support Plan and later helped to produce the SEN Action Plan

because her manager was overstretched and did not have sufficient time to give to the consultation process

### **Governors – voluntary experts**

**(G1)** A school governor, currently a Chair of a Governing Body and, who was also a tutor on courses for governors. He was previously the chair of the governors' association in the County when the association was established. He was a retired manager with responsibility for the provision of quality services in a multi national company.

**(G2)** He had been a school governor for nearly 40 years and currently a Chair of a Governing Body. He was a committee member of the governors' association in the County when the association was first established. He had been co-opted to the National Executive of the National Governors' Council and was currently serving as one of two National Vice Chairmen.

### **Headteachers – paid experts who volunteered to serve their professional associations**

**(H1)** He had been a headteacher for five years of a special school and a member of the executive of the association of special education senior managers in the County. He had previous experience as teacher and headteacher in special schools specialising in pupils with emotional behavioural difficulties. He was asked by his association to serve on the group contributing to the EDP as a replacement for a colleague who left the LEA. He therefore fulfilled a role which he had not envisaged.

**(H2)** He had been a headteacher for 11 years of a large secondary school. He had been a representative on the council of the association of headteachers of secondary schools in the County for 6 years and previous chair of this association. The headteacher was chair of the management committee for the local pupil referral unit.

**(H3)** She was a headteacher of an infant school for 8 years and a member of the executive of the association of primary school headteachers in the County; she had also been one of a research group of headteachers across the county focusing on improving schools. She felt that it was her turn to represent her association on a LEA working group.

**Secretary of a teachers' trade union – paid/voluntary expert**

**(T1)** He was the secretary for one of the largest professional associations for teachers across the County. He taught mathematics in a large comprehensive school.

## **ANNEX 6 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

My interviewing method used the following questions; these were augmented by questions for clarification to follow up important leads, and summary statements to ensure that I had understood what the interviewee had been saying.

1. How long have you been involved with the education service? In what ways?
2. How were you identified to contribute to the Education Development Plan/Behaviour Support Plan/Special Educational Needs Action Plan/Early Years Development and Childcare Plan?
3. Where has this Plan come from?
4. How important has it been to consult a wide range of interested groups on the Plan?
5. What impact do you think these groups have had on the final Plan that has been produced?
6. When you go to meetings how far are you able to say what you want?
7. How have you contributed to the final papers/Plan that has been produced? Do you think you have influenced the final outcome? How?
8. Has the Plan contributed to change?
9. What effect have you or your group had on change?
10. How far does your contribution reflect your own views or those of the group you represent?
11. Tell me about how decisions were made.
12. What values have guided you in the contribution that you have made?
13. What do you think the group preparing the Plan want to get done?
14. To whom are you accountable in making your contribution to producing the Plan?
15. What do you think has been achieved by this group that has been preparing the Plan?

For Elected Members

16. What do you think about having to take account of the views of other interested groups in preparing the Plan?

For other representatives

17. What do you think about having to take account of the views of Elected Members in preparing the Plan?

18. Do you think education officers should be involved in preparing the Plan? Why?

19. What should be their responsibilities?

20. How do you think this Plan fits in with the overall functions and priorities of the LEA?

21. Do you think the Plan is worthwhile?

1 December, 2001