



OFFICE FOR STANDARDS
IN EDUCATION

**INSPECTION OF
SUFFOLK
LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

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INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection was carried out by OFSTED in conjunction with the Audit Commission under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The inspection used the *Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities (July 1999)* which focuses on the effectiveness of the local education authority (LEA) work to support school improvement. The inspection also took account of the Local Government Act 1999, insofar as it relates to work undertaken by the LEA on Best Value.

2. The inspection was based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA; on school inspection information; relevant evidence from HMI national monitoring work and audit reports; on documentation and discussions with LEA elected members, staff in the education department and in other council departments. Discussions were also held with focus groups of headteachers, governors, teacher associations, parents, other agencies and LEA partners, including diocesan representatives. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on aspects of the work of the LEA was circulated to 349 schools. The response rate was 80 per cent.

3. The inspection also involved studies of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to one nursery school, ten primary schools, two middle (deemed secondary) schools, eight secondary schools, and one special school. The visits tested the views of governors, headteachers and other staff on the key aspects of the LEA's strategy. The visits also considered whether the support that is provided by the LEA contributes, where appropriate, to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in the school, and provides value for money. The inspection took account of relevant evidence from Her Majesty's Inspectors' national monitoring work.

COMMENTARY

4. Suffolk is a large shire authority, serving an expanding, mostly white, population of 675,000 people in the East of England. There is considerable local variation in the communities the council serves. These include the economically buoyant southern area and the expanding container port of Felixstowe in the east. Elsewhere, the decline in the fishing and agriculture industries has affected communities, especially in the northern port of Lowestoft and in the low waged economy found in many rural areas. Overall, the context of the LEA has more features of advantage than disadvantage.

5. The attainment of pupils in Suffolk schools compares well with national averages, often exceeding them, and is broadly in line with the attainment of pupils in similar authorities. School inspections indicate that leadership and management in schools are good, and are improving at a faster rate than that found nationally, particularly in primary schools. The percentage of schools judged to be good or very good is well above the national average for primary schools and above average for secondary schools. In both phases, the percentage of good or very good schools is above the average for similar authorities.

6. The council has been controlled by a joint administration of the Labour and Liberal Democrat members since 1993. In 1998 the council began to streamline its management and decision-making processes, and has developed them well. Executive, scrutiny and overview functions are defined clearly and operate flexibly and efficiently. Members have demonstrated a high degree of consensus over the priority accorded to education. They have made spending on education a high priority, although the funding available to the council is slightly below average.

7. The leadership of senior officers is a strength of the council. The chief executive and the corporate management team have developed effective procedures for securing consistent approaches. This means that corporate priorities for improvement are translated into service level objectives. Performance management, making good use of the extensive range of high quality data available to officers and members, is a strong feature of the council's work. The approach to Best Value is developing rapidly and is beginning to have significant effect on the culture and organisation of the council. The director of education commands the respect of the education service. Schools, in particular, value his openness, willingness to listen and the leadership he offers.

8. Relationships with schools are very good. The three area offices offer a wide range of school support packages, as well as taking the lead responsibility for monitoring performance and challenging schools to improve. Relatively few schools have had significant weaknesses identified through school inspections, and most of these schools have been effectively supported in making good progress. Consultation with schools is good and the council is beginning to realise its aspiration to be a responsive organisation that is committed to continuous improvement.

9. An overriding aim of the council is to tackle and remediate social exclusion. The education service, and the elected members, make a major contribution to its strategies to achieve this aim. Good corporate working practices are being developed to ensure that plans are coherent and address community developments, school needs and support for individual pupils. Alongside and closely linked to this priority, the LEA has been a champion for the arts and recreation in education. It has preserved a very wide range of opportunities for its young people to extend their experience of cultural and recreational pursuits.

10. The LEA performs most of its functions well. Its strengths include:

- the Education Development Plan and its implementation;
- the allocation of resources to priorities;
- the definition and exercise of its duties to monitor, challenge, intervene in and support schools;
- the value for money of services to support school improvement;
- the effectiveness of its strategy for supporting schools in the use of performance data, literacy, information and communication technology, school management, governors, the early years and for 14-19 education;
- all aspects of corporate planning and strategic management;
- financial services, grounds maintenance and school catering;
- the strategy for special educational needs;
- the provision of school places and asset management planning;
- support for health, safety and child protection;
- support for children in public care;
- support for children of ethnic minority heritage, including Travellers;
- support for gifted and talented children, and
- the effectiveness of measures taken to promote social inclusion and combat racism.

11. Other functions are performed satisfactorily and, whilst some have aspects in need of improvement, only one function was judged to be weak:

- the management of admissions appeals to schools in 2001.

12. Suffolk LEA is highly effective. It has offered well-respected leadership to schools for many years and has been willing to change and adapt to new requirements, in response to both local needs and national priorities. Officers and members demonstrate a real commitment to managing change and to providing the highest possible levels of service to the community. It has a very good capacity to manage improvement, a factor that has contributed significantly to it being a very good LEA.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

13. Suffolk is a large and expanding county with a population of 675,000. The council serves a largely rural area interspersed with small villages and towns. In January 2001, unemployment, at 2.4 per cent, was below the national average. Decline in the agriculture and fishing industries has resulted in pockets of unemployment that are well above the national average. Average earnings in the county are below both regional and national averages, as is the proportion of adults with higher education qualifications. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals in 2000 was broadly in line with the national average, 14.2 per cent in primary schools against a national average of 19.7 per cent, and 12.0 per cent in secondary schools compared with 17.6 per cent nationally. The proportion of pupils of minority ethnic heritage, at 3.2 per cent, is well below the national average of 12.1 per cent. The overall percentage of minority ethnic groups in the total population at the time of the last census was 2.2 per cent. There are established minority ethnic communities in Ipswich (4.5 per cent of the population) and Forest Heath (5.9 per cent). Since 1997, some 300 asylum seekers have arrived in the county, mainly through the port of Felixstowe. There are currently 31 asylum seekers in Suffolk schools. Overall, the context of the LEA has more features of advantage than disadvantage, but this masks considerable local variations.

14. The county council offers nursery provision and in 2000/2001, 7,648 four-year-olds (96.5 per cent) had an early years place, including 6,166 in LEA-maintained provision and 1,482 in association with private and voluntary providers. Seventeen per cent of three-year-olds had a grant funded place. The LEA maintains 349 schools, comprising:

Nursery		1
Primary	(first/infant, junior and junior/infant schools)	256
Secondary	(includes 40 middle deemed secondary schools and 38 high/upper schools of which 30 have a sixth form)	78
Special schools		9
Pupil referral units		7

15. There are 48,017 pupils in nursery and primary schools, 53,036 in secondary and 791 in special schools, giving a total LEA population of 101,844 pupils. Pupils transfer into secondary schools at the age of nine (into middle schools) and at the age of 13 (upper schools) in the western and some parts of the northern areas and at the age of 11 elsewhere. Schools serving British and USA military establishments experience high levels of pupil mobility, as do some schools in the Saxmundham and Lowestoft areas. Twelve schools have specialist college status, of which nine are technology colleges; two are sports colleges; and one a language college. One middle school has been designated as a training school by the Department for Education and Skills.

16. Statements of special educational needs have been made for 3,653 pupils. This represents 2.2 per cent of the 0 -19 pupil population, which is broadly in line with the national average. Of the pupils with statements, three per cent are

educated in schools not maintained by Suffolk LEA. The proportion of all pupils with statements educated in special schools is 0.52 per cent, which is below the national average.

Performance

17. A detailed analysis of the performance of schools in Suffolk has been supplied to the LEA in the form of the LEA statistical profile, from which the following information has been extracted:

- The performance of pupils in Suffolk schools is at least in line with national averages and is often above these averages. It is comparable with similar authorities.¹
- Results in the 2000 national tests in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 1 are broadly in line with national averages and similar authorities. In reading, they are above the national average. Results at Key Stage 2 for English, mathematics and science are broadly in line with national and similar authorities' averages, except in mathematics where they are below the average for similar authorities. Key Stage 3 results for mathematics and science are above national averages, they are in line with the national average for English and are broadly in line with similar authorities for all three subjects.
- The GCSE examination results in 2000 are above the national averages in terms of the percentage of pupils gaining one or more grades A* - C, five or more grades A*- C, and in the average points scored. They are broadly in line with similar authorities.
- The average points score at age 18 for pupils taking A levels is broadly in line with both national and similar authorities.
- Progress of pupils between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 is below average. Between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3, it is broadly in line with the average progress. Between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, it is well above the average progress.
- The percentage of schools judged to be good or very good by OFSTED inspections indicates that primary schools are well above the national average and secondary schools are above the national average. Both primary and secondary schools are above the average for similar authorities.
- The quality of teaching graded good in recent inspections in primary and secondary schools was better than the average for all LEAs.
- Attendance in primary (95.2 per cent) and secondary schools (92.9 per cent) is well above the national average. Unauthorised absence (primary, 0.2 per cent and secondary, 0.6 per cent) is below the national figures.

¹ Suffolk's statistical neighbours are: Gloucestershire, Norfolk, Lincolnshire, Dorset, Devon, Cornwall, Hampshire, Cambridgeshire, Oxfordshire and Somerset

- The rate of permanent exclusions in primary schools (0.4 per 1,000 pupils) and in secondary schools (2.1 per 1,000 pupils) is broadly in line with national figures.

18. Eight primary, one special and four secondary schools in Suffolk had been awarded Beacon status up to September 2001. Since 1993, six schools in Suffolk have been identified by OFSTED as requiring special measures, two primary, one special and three secondary schools. Four schools have been removed from this category, so that at the time of the inspection there were two schools in special measures: one high school and one middle school. Three of the six schools requiring special measures had previously been identified as having serious weaknesses. Eleven other schools have been identified as having serious weakness, nine primary, one secondary and one special school. Three primary schools had improved in subsequent OFSTED inspections; one special school has closed, leaving seven schools awaiting the outcome of the next inspection. Additionally, two primary schools have been identified by OFSTED as underachieving. In 1999, the council achieved Beacon status for its school improvement work, including preventing and remedying school failure.

Funding

19. Education spending has been consistently above the level of Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) in recent years, as has been council spending generally. However, Suffolk's SSA per pupil is a little less than the average for similar authorities and for English counties as a whole. In 2001/2002, the council plans to spend £5.2million over SSA on education, the equivalent of 1.9 per cent. During the last three years, the increase in education SSA has been passed on fully to schools.

20. The local schools budget per pupil (£2,651) is above the average for similar authorities (£2,579) and English counties (£2,584) and only a little less than the national average of £2,695.

21. Suffolk retains significantly lower than average funding centrally, compared with similar authorities, English counties and all English authorities as a whole. The main areas of central expenditure, under the Fair Funding headings and expressed as £ per pupil, are as follows:

	Suffolk	Similar authorities	English counties	England
Strategic management	79	90	89	104
Special needs	132	151	147	160
School improvement	20	20	20	26
Access	140	162	146	132
Total LEA activities in the local schools budget	386	439	427	446

22. The level of delegation to schools (85.4 per cent) was higher in 2000/2001 than that for similar authorities (83.4 per cent), English counties (84 per cent) and for England as a whole (84.2 per cent).

23. Capital expenditure in the authority has risen steadily in recent years, from just over £9 million in 1997/1998 to nearly £24 million in 2001/2002. The council has gained substantially from basic need allocations over the years and, more recently, from the Government's New Deal for Schools programme. It has also undertaken successful work in raising contributions from property developers where extra school places are needed.

24. Most areas of major additional grant funding are not available to the authority as the local indicators of deprivation and need are not high. Although the council has been active in seeking funding from a variety of sources (and has actively supported schools in their endeavours), the additional income from such sources has been relatively limited.

Council structure

25. Since 1993, political control in Suffolk has been in the hands of the Labour and Liberal Democrat groups through a joint administration. The council has 80 elected members with 36 Labour, 31 Conservative, 12 Liberal Democrat and one Independent member.

26. In May 1999, the council began to modernise its political structures in line with Government guidelines. The current structure was adopted in June 2001 in the light of the experience gained in the previous two years. A leader and an executive committee are appointed by the council. The executive committee comprises nine members, including the leader, drawn from the controlling administration. Each member leads on a portfolio; taken together, they cover all aspects of the council's work. Overview and scrutiny functions are discharged effectively by the scrutiny committee and by four theme panels. The scrutiny committee and the learning for life theme panel are chaired by the opposition. The learning for life theme panel has co-opted teacher, parent and diocesan representatives and retains the oversight of education matters. Policy development panels, which include co-opted members, are formed to undertake policy work in detail. Special educational needs audit proposals and a review of provision for pupils with behaviour difficulties have been managed through such panels. The arrangements for the management of the council's business work very effectively.

27. The full council approves major plans, such as the policy and performance plan (Best Value Performance Plan) and the Education Development Plan. The council also debates matters referred to it by the executive or scrutiny committees.

The Education Development Plan

28. The 1999 - 2002 Education Development Plan (EDP) has provided a good framework for school improvement. The EDP identifies clearly a number of contextual issues that the plan sets out to address. These include: the large number of pupils transported to school each day, with a corresponding impact on the length

of the school day and access to extra-curricular activities; the issues of continuity in a mixed two and three-tier school system; low expectations in a low-waged economy, and the relatively high proportion of small schools serving rural communities. The audit, from which the plan's priorities are derived, draws extensively on the high quality performance data that the LEA has developed over many years.

29. The priorities are matched to local needs. They are:

- supporting and challenging schools in raising individual pupil progress and achievement;
- improving underperforming schools;
- raising the quality of teaching and learning in schools;
- improving management and leadership in schools;
- engaging and supporting parents in becoming directly involved in raising the achievement and progress of their children;
- raising attainment in literacy;
- raising attainment in mathematics; and
- improving the use of information and communication technology in leadership and management;

30. The plan links well to corporate plans, such as the policy and performance plan, and to strategic plans for the education service. Thus, priorities for school improvement are seen in the context of the work of the council as a whole. This enables community regeneration strategies to be planned to contribute to the EDP, particularly to priorities one, two and five. Most of the actions in the plan are appropriate and are given in specific detail, making the plan a coherent working document. However, in priority one and, to a lesser extent, priority eight, a lack of suitable success criteria for particular actions makes the monitoring and evaluation of these priorities more difficult. Nevertheless, the arrangements for monitoring the implementation of the plan are good. They are thorough, draw upon a wide range of strategies and are contributing to its successful implementation.

31. The EDP was relevant to the needs of each of the 22 schools visited during the course of the inspection, and evidence of its effective implementation was good in nearly four-fifths of them. This is linked to the very good consultation undertaken by the LEA as the plan was being drawn up. Schools are familiar with the plan, are aware of its implications for them and are able to draw upon it in setting out their own development and improvement plans. The resources allocated are sufficient for the planned actions. They are differentiated according to need; for example, the resources allocated to priority two enable the advisory service to focus on the schools identified as having the greatest need of external support for improvement.

32. The targets set out in the plan are challenging and based on the LEA's extensive database on pupil attainment. The 2002 target was revised upwards to 56 per cent of 16-year-olds to achieve five or more grades A* - C and is on course to be achieved, with 53.3 per cent achieving at this level in 2000. The target for 83 per cent of 11-year-olds to reach Level 4 and above in the national test for literacy is also on course to be achieved, provided that the targeted action that is planned in schools

is effective. The numeracy target for 11-year-olds of 78 per cent will require substantial improvement over the 2000 result of 69 per cent, although school forecasts indicate a confidence that any shortfall will be slight. Progress towards meeting the 2002 target to reduce exclusions to 85 pupils appeared to be on course but a rise in exclusions in the latter part of 2000/2001 suggests that it is unlikely to be met. Good progress is being made towards meeting the targets for unauthorised absence to 0.08 per cent in primary schools and to 0.35 per cent in secondary schools. Although targets for children in public care and for pupils of minority ethnic heritage were not included in the original EDP, they are covered well in the linked service and management action plans.

The allocation of resources to priorities

33. The council allocates its resources to priorities effectively. It has developed a very clear planning regime, which gives top priority to education. This is reflected in the subsequent allocation of resources. Departmental priorities are linked closely to overall corporate objectives and the authority has met all the Government's spending targets.

34. Consultation on the budget is conducted principally through representative headteacher groups and procedures work well. Schools receive notification of their budget, including the majority of Standards Fund allocations by mid-February, based on Form 7 actual numbers. These are adjusted in the year following only when pupil number increases are significant, with the result that schools with a rising roll are, in effect, under-funded for as long the roll continues to rise. Conversely, schools with falling rolls have their budget reductions delayed.

35. The central education budget is carefully monitored and under control. Corporate recharges to education are made. They are based on service level agreements and are uncontroversial.

36. The level of school budget surpluses is too high. At the end of 2000/2001, some 82 per cent of primary schools and 64 per cent of secondary and middle schools carried forward a surplus of more than five per cent. The LEA is, however, working actively to reduce these levels. Schools have been asked to account for their surpluses and, to the chagrin of some headteachers, the position in individual schools has been, rightly, publicised. The number of schools in deficit is correspondingly low. Where they have got into deficit, the LEA has an excellent record of working with schools to produce a realistic recovery plan.

37. The LEA is in the process of introducing a major amendment to the school funding formula but the formula overall is in need of review, since its structure is not explicitly related to any model of current spending needs in schools. The present proposal, for which there has been exemplary preparation and detailed consultation, is to fund special educational needs based on an audit of need and aims to target resources far more accurately and transparently where they are needed. The principle is a good one, and accepted as such by most schools. However, the LEA has sensibly delayed implementation by six months to allow further training and further consideration of the implications.

Best Value

38. The LEA's approach and performance in this area has been satisfactory and is improving. The policy and performance plan was judged to be satisfactory by the external auditor, with little adverse comment. The council is well-placed to make a success of the Best Value regime. Performance management is well-embedded, with a resulting coherence between corporate, departmental and service plans. Each Best Value performance indicator is the responsibility of a named manager and, from this year, managers are asked to set out targets for the next three years to assist the LEA in meeting and exceeding Best Value upper quartile targets.

39. The guidance on conducting Best Value reviews has been improved by helpful additional information, for example, on the different roles and responsibilities of those participating in the process. The council has also amended its review programme to incorporate broader, thematic reviews across services. For example, it has completed a review of the range of services covered by the Quality Protects management action plan.

40. Three Best Value reviews were inspected: the school library service, caretaking/cleaning, and grounds maintenance. These are reported on in more detail in the appendices to this report. While there were benefits resulting from the reviews in terms of improved practice, they did not provide fundamental challenge.

41. Advice and support to schools on Best Value is unsatisfactory. While schools are clear about the implications of Best Value for LEA services, they have only the haziest understanding of the ways in which school managers themselves might apply Best Value principles. The LEA has so far made little attempt to provide training and information for schools on this issue and has not ensured that schools make returns demonstrating how Best Value principles are applied.

Recommendation

- Provide appropriate guidance and training to schools on the application of Best Value principles and monitor school performance in this area.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Monitoring, challenge, support and intervention

42. The LEA is very effective in promoting school improvement through its policies and practices. Institutional support to schools, including the co-ordination of targeted support for schools of concern, is managed through the three area offices by an area management team of senior officers and advisers, under the supervision of the deputy director.

43. Each area education manager also retains a countywide brief for an aspect of policy. Corporate policies are embedded in local practice, which strengthens the arrangement, as the area offices also have the remit to develop approaches that are appropriate to local needs. For the most part, the strategy works well with officers and advisers working in county wide teams or exercises, whilst focusing their institutional improvement work in line with locally identified needs. Schools understand, and welcome, the structure and are clear about the LEA's definition of its strategies to monitor, challenge, support and intervene in schools.

44. Well-established performance data are used to monitor and analyse school performance. At the frequent monitoring meetings, account is taken of other indicators of school performance, such as finance, personnel, special educational needs etc. These meetings are an integral part of a monitoring strategy that has enabled the LEA to reduce contact in schools to one half day per year to discuss the school's targets. This is appropriate for an LEA with many well-managed, good schools and allows the LEA to focus effectively its advisory and centrally deployed support resources on the schools in greatest need of external input.

45. Schools identified as being of concern are further monitored through regular meetings of their core action groups. This level of monitoring enables the LEA to form a detailed picture of each school and serves to focus all aspects of LEA services on school improvement.

46. Schools are challenged to improve, through the annual visit but also through many of the advisory and officer contacts that the LEA has with them. A recent consultation exercise with governors about possible changes to the LEA categorisation of schools revealed that a majority of governors viewed the challenge function as an effective and important aspect of the LEA's relationship with the school.

47. A wide range of intervention strategies is used. In the last year, greater use has been made of the powers to offer formal advice to headteachers and governors when serious concerns are raised through the monitoring process. In addition to the eleven schools identified by OFSTED school inspections as causing concern, a further twenty-four schools have been identified as needing higher levels of monitoring and additional, targeted, support or intervention. Most, but not all, schools that have been the subject of targeted support have improved quickly because of the LEA input. Planning for withdrawing from a school is less well developed and, although monitoring continues, there are few instances of good exit strategies being drawn up in association with schools.

48. Strategic planning of school improvement services is very good. The assistant director for quality and improvement has responsibility for translating the council's corporate priorities into annual work programmes for the advisory service. This works effectively and, combined with an efficient performance management system and well-established time monitoring systems, ensures that corporate priorities are embedded in the service's work. The advisory service is managed very effectively by the assistant director and her senior advisers, three of whom have an area-based remit. The other three senior advisers retain county wide briefs focused on improving teaching and learning. Link advisers work effectively with pyramids of schools within the area teams, whilst specialist subject advisers and advisory teachers have a countywide brief.

49. The LEA has been successful in recruiting high quality staff to support school improvement. Most advisers have recent experience of senior management in schools and they are held in high regard by the schools. They have very good expertise and are deployed well. Resources for advice and training have been delegated to schools for some time and all schools purchase services. Centrally retained expenditure on school improvement at £20 per pupil is below the national average of £26. It is in line with spending in similar authorities. However, the high level of school purchase means that the advisory service is able to retain 54.3 full time equivalent advisers, with an annual budget of £4 million.

50. The LEA support for schools was highly effective in over half of the schools visited. Schools in Suffolk are generally well managed, few have been deemed to require external support and the costs of supporting schools are below the national average. The LEA support offers very good value for money.

Collection and analysis of data

51. The LEA has developed excellent expertise in providing and using data on school performance. Schools are provided with very comprehensive, high quality data. They find the data useful and the analyses helpful because comparisons are made with local schools. They are supported well by additional documentation and good training. In addition, the use of county wide testing enables very good value-added analysis, based on pupil-level data. This results in early identification of pupils with special educational needs, as well as those identified as being at the higher end of the ability range.

52. A detailed pupil attainment database records individual pupil profiles and allows for comparisons, attainment outputs and investigations into how pupils perform. There is a very comprehensive range of data sent to schools over an annual cycle. It includes results from tests, prior attainment benchmarks for Years 2, 6 and 9 and analyses of national tests and baseline results. The data are understood fully by managers and governors in schools and help planning. The data on the performance of minority ethnic pupils has been improved and has, this year, provided a thorough analysis for each group. The progress of pupils in public care is tracked carefully and their attainments at the end of each key stage are monitored.

53. Most schools visited enthused about the quality of the data. The LEA makes good use of the data to target its challenge to the expectations schools have of their pupils and to improve performance over time. A good example of this has been the termly targeting of schools with weaker writing scores, resulting in support for them through a series of writing workshops to improve Year 6 writing.

54. Link advisers are well informed and are very competent in their use of performance data. Their expertise and support helps schools analyse data, set challenging but realistic targets and plan for improvement. They give a rigorous challenge to schools that might otherwise have set low or safe targets.

55. Electronic transfer of data between schools and the LEA is secure and well established. It is also effective at the point when pupils change schools. There has been thorough research into the differences in performance of pupils who transfer between schools during their education. The performance of schools in the different tiers of education available in the authority has been carefully analysed and LEA support has been targeted well in different phases. As a result of this well grounded approach, there are no significant differences in the performance of pupils in two and three-tier systems once they reach the end of Key Stage 4.

Support for literacy

56. Support to schools for raising standards in literacy and the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy at Key Stage 1 and 2 is good. This is because there have been strong strategies and well-focused plans to improve standards, in particular, in writing. These include a project to boost writing scores in national tests through improved teaching and learning. In addition, the LEA has identified, under an Education Development Plan priority, time for advisers to work with 25 schools with significant gaps between writing and reading attainment so that resources are effectively targeted to meet these needs. Outcomes from LEA monitoring visits indicate that there are improvements in teaching of writing

57. The management of the National Literacy Strategy and the quality of the consultants are good. Nearly half the primary schools and over a quarter of secondary schools that responded to the school survey thought the support was very good. Training is offered at all three area training centres, giving local access and a good level of flexibility through optional evening sessions or one-day conferences. Co-ordinators are also well supported through their regular meetings with consultants and through their pyramid groups.

58. The operational plan for literacy sets out clearly the LEA priorities, team management, training available and the direct support offered to schools. In addition, there is literacy support for schools with early years provision and use is made of expert teachers to help schools experiencing difficulties. In schools visited during the inspection, support for literacy was good in nearly every case.

59. Standards are broadly in line with national averages at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 and above this level for reading at Key Stage 1. Good progress has been made in raising the performance of the higher achievers in writing and the rate of

improvement in writing has been above the national and similar authority trends. At Key Stage 2, the performance of higher achievers is also improving when compared to national averages. The authority should meet its challenging target of 83 per cent of pupils achieving Level 4 or above for English by 2002. The provisional results for 2001 indicate that 76 per cent reached this level.

60. At Key Stage 3, the rate of improvement in English is comparable to the national trend, although below the trend in similar authorities. The LEA has put in place a literacy strategy at Key Stage 3 to remedy this. This has involved consultants identifying good teaching and learning in schools to ensure that the best practice already in place at Key Stage 2 in a number of middle schools can be used as effective models for improving standards in secondary and middle schools.

Support for numeracy

61. Support for numeracy is satisfactory, with considerable strengths. The LEA has a clearly defined strategy for raising standards at Key Stages 1 and 2. In addition, provision for higher achievers, through the introduction of summer schools and direct intervention into improving standards at Key Stage 3, is helping to raise the profile in schools. Additional focus is being given to problem solving, which was identified as a weak area. However, despite these good efforts, the LEA is aware that it will be difficult to achieve the ambitious targets for 2002.

62. Standards are broadly in line with national averages at Key Stages 2 and 3 and above the average at Key Stage 3. They are broadly in line with similar authorities, except at Key Stage 2 when they are below this average. The rate of improvement at Key Stage 2 is below that seen nationally. Good use is being made of information and communication technology to aid and support learning in mathematics, through improved distance learning packages and support for co-ordinators in schools.

63. The LEA has provided good quality training to implement the national strategy. The LEA identifies accurately and targets schools with particular needs. Despite staffing changes, the management framework, which covers literacy and numeracy, ensures that the consultants are able to provide support where necessary. They have a range of relevant expertise and can respond to specific needs from a point of strength. Their work is supplemented well by leading mathematics teachers.

64. There are good networks established through the three areas and the pyramid groups. Schools know what level of support to expect and appreciate the range of advice and training offered to them. In the school survey, support for numeracy was held in high regard.

65. The LEA monitors challenges and supports its schools well through its link advisers, leading teachers and consultants. Schools are helped to analyse test results in order to identify strengths and weaknesses and they appreciate the quality of the performance data. Emphasis is now being placed on how to make better use of the data to monitor and challenge the schools where standards in mathematics are improving at a slower rate than in other core subjects.

66. A similar approach to that adopted at Key Stage 2 will be used to introduce the strategy for support at Key Stage 3. However, this is still at an early stage and has had little impact yet. The LEA sensibly intends to focus on some good practice at Key Stage 2 in middle schools to provide a model for all schools to build on with Key Stage 3 pupils.

Support for information and communication technology

67. The LEA has a good corporate strategy for information and communication technology (ICT) to raise the quality of teaching and learning and improve management and administration. Its support for ICT is good. Most schools are very well equipped with ICT systems and this has contributed to the improved teaching and learning of skills. The authority has made good use of the National Grid for Learning grant. The ratio of computers to pupils, in both primary and secondary schools, is already better than national targets set for 2002 and has resulted in greater use of computers, by pupils, across the curriculum. The authority is well ahead in the procurement and use of broadband technology and most secondary schools are confident about making use of LEA provision in this area.

68. OFSTED school inspection reports indicate that pupils' attainment in ICT is rising steadily, despite an undue readiness on the part of schools to accept standards that were too low. For example, attainment at the end of Key Stage 3 was barely above that expected nationally a key stage earlier. This lack of aspiration is now being overcome.

69. The LEA has been energetic in promoting training under the New Opportunities Fund. A range of providers were identified and approved by the authority and schools are pleased with the support and guidance material. Fifty per cent of teachers are involved in ICT training. This is higher than the national percentage. The target to complete this by 2003 is later than originally intended but is probably realistic, given the recent appointment of new staff.

70. Schools are well supported by newsletters, a range of courses targeted at improving teachers' skills and courses designed to enhance the use of ICT in curriculum areas. Teachers endorsed the availability of the high quality material provided to help them make effective use of software for supporting the curriculum. Consultants and advisers from a range of subjects support the ICT groups so that expertise and ideas can be shared. They give good leadership on the contribution ICT can make to the curriculum. The LEA has its own intranet site, which has links to websites that provide interesting updates on curriculum matters.

71. The LEA actively monitors and evaluates schools' progress in implementing ICT, and deploys its resources effectively. The authority was one of the first to transfer data between schools and holds a central database of pupil data. Whilst this is supporting the raising of standards in literacy and numeracy, it has not yet been used to track the extent to which pupil attainment has improved in ICT.

Support for schools causing concern

72. Support for schools causing concern is satisfactory, with considerable strengths. The LEA has been effective in responding to the six schools requiring special measures and helping them to improve within, or close to, the recommended period. It has been less effective, in the past, at responding to schools in which serious weaknesses had been identified as three of these schools were deemed by subsequent inspections to require special measures. In all, fourteen schools have been identified since 1997 as having serious weaknesses. Seven of these schools await a further inspection, although in most cases LEA and HMI monitoring indicate that satisfactory progress is being made. The percentage of schools identified by OFSTED inspections in these categories is low and reflects favourably on the support given by the LEA to its schools.

73. The identification and management of support for schools of concern are the responsibility of the area education managers. Regular and thorough monitoring meetings take place, involving advisers and officers, who categorise the level of monitoring needed for all schools. Schools recommended for the high level of monitoring are informed of the reasons for the LEA's concern. However, the outcomes of the monitoring are not always communicated clearly to schools, especially if the concerns are considered by officers to be of a minor or passing nature.

74. When a school is formally designated as a school of concern, a core action group is usually formed to consider what financial and staff support resources should be allocated, from the Standards Fund, from the retained funding under the Education Development Plan, priority two, or by the school from its delegated budget. Allocations are clear and their expenditure is monitored closely by the area senior advisers. However, in three of the schools visited, the purpose or focus of the allocations was not well understood by the schools, or was considered to be inappropriate. Conversely, in four schools, the processes of identification, allocation and communication had been managed very effectively and good progress had been made.

Recommendation

- Ensure that the precise nature of LEA concerns about a school of concern is communicated clearly and the purposes of additional funds are agreed in all schools.

75. The use made of core action groups differs between schools, ostensibly in line with the identified needs. Their main function is perceived by many schools to be to hold the school accountable for the improvements it is making, in line with the improvement plan. However, and often more effectively, some headteachers and governors are involved closely in the work of the groups. This enables them to respond more flexibly to changing circumstances and to target resources accurately in line with needs. In the past, the extent to which headteachers and, in particular, governors were aware of a core action group's evaluation of progress made and needs arising has been too variable. The LEA's procedures have been revised and

are applied more consistently. Most schools are clear about the procedures, and the LEA's application of them. Powers to intervene are used appropriately in most cases.

76. Good use is made of seconded teachers and senior managers from other schools. This strategy is effective, particularly in secondary schools, when consultant and associate headteachers have been designated to support weak, or interim management arrangements in schools of concern. Similar, good, use has been made of additional governors.

77. Members of the executive are kept informed about progress and are helpfully involved in the development of community-focused strategies to support schools of concern where social and economic factors in the neighbourhood are considered to be an obstacle to school improvement. Good use is made of council wide resources to address the needs of these schools and the communities they serve.

Support for governors

78. The approach to promoting school autonomy and self-evaluation through support to governors is good. Governors are supplied with a good range of documentation and information about their duties and roles. They are fully aware of the level of support they can expect from the authority. This includes the excellent performance data and guidance notes that help governors to set challenging targets for their schools.

79. Governors are provided with sufficient, relevant, information through a good range of courses and focus group meetings within their area. Termly briefings to chairs of governing bodies are held in high regard as authoritative sources of information. The area consultative groups are well established and good relationships have been created with senior officers. Governors have access to their own web-site. They have formed a forum group of governors, supported by headteachers and LEA representatives, and receive regular newsletters. Many are now making regular use of e-mail addresses to send and receive information. In the school survey, most schools were very positive about the support offered to governors.

80. Governors share with the LEA a commitment to build school autonomy. Training and support provided by the LEA are tailored to meet this aim. Recent training has taken account of the different stages governors are at in their terms of office. Useful courses for new governors continue and well targeted training to address the needs of more experienced governors is also offered.

81. Well-conceived policies are in place to recruit and retain governors, but these have not been as successful as the LEA would hope. It has been difficult to recruit and replace governors in some areas. Success has been achieved, though, in the recruitment of governors from minority ethnic groups and one enthusiastic governor has been instrumental in leading this drive for recruitment.

82. The LEA responds well to governors' needs and supports them well in schools that are of concern. The LEA supplies clerks to governors' meetings as a traded service that all but 20 schools purchase. It ensures that the minutes of governors' meetings are published within three weeks, which has particularly helped to improve communication and planning.

Support for school management

83. Support for school management is very good. Schools rate highly the support offered by the LEA as part of its strategy for school improvement. The support is based on detailed knowledge of schools. A wide-ranging package of local networks and LEA provision is available to schools to help them to manage change and improvement.

84. Good quality training and advice are offered to staff at all levels to promote autonomy. The area office structure adds flexibility and choice, as well as giving further opportunity to work alongside other schools in the area. Many headteachers spoke with enthusiasm about the support for themselves, for their staff, and of the opportunities for career development within the authority. OFSTED school inspections show a greater rate of improvement in leadership and management than that found nationally, although this improvement has been faster in primary than in secondary schools.

85. The programmes of training and development for teachers are comprehensive and designed to meet the needs identified by the LEA. Courses can be tailored to meet the needs of individual schools. The authority evaluates the take up and impact of courses carefully and the information is used to alter content, venues and organisation. Their evaluations indicate that course objectives are met fully on 97 per cent of courses. When outside training providers such as independent consultants are used, the authority assists in the evaluation of their quality. National training and opportunities for additional qualifications are all well supported by the LEA.

86. A significant number of teachers remain in the authority once they have taken up a position in Suffolk. Headteachers are of the view that the LEA's strong support for continuing professional development is a key factor in promoting the recruitment and retention of teachers. Whilst recruitment pressures are clearly felt in schools and are growing, they are not as great as in many other areas. There were 128 secondary school teacher vacancies at the end of June. This was reduced to 12.2 vacancies by the start of the autumn term.

87. Induction procedures for new headteachers are effectively administered and all new recruits are supported by a mentor. The programme is designed to meet individual needs when a headteacher is appointed for the first time. The response to this is, at times, mixed. Some headteachers rate the support highly, whilst others, albeit in the minority, are less positive about its effectiveness. Regular newsletters ensure that all schools are kept fully informed of national and LEA priorities. Outcomes of link adviser visits are mostly communicated well to schools.

88. There are good support networks in place through the pyramid groups that include all phases of education. These networks, led and monitored by LEA consultants and advisers, enable schools to improve their evaluation practices. There are good partnerships developing with Beacon schools so that good practice can be shared.

89. Induction and support for newly qualified teachers is effective. It is organised well, with opportunities provided to work with other newly qualified teachers as well as to attend courses at a local level. The support was praised highly by teachers in the schools visited. Although the authority is without a university within its borders, it promotes a wide range of staff development and training, offering a high quality service for all teachers. A high proportion of teachers is engaged in award bearing and accredited training.

Support for early years education

90. The LEA's support for early years is a high priority. It is very good and meets the needs of local communities across all areas of the county. It is led and managed by the early years development and childcare partnership. The target to provide universal education for all three-year-olds is close to being met. The number of qualified teachers and early years' co-ordinators has risen, as has the number of funded settings for three and four-year-olds. The co-ordination of child minders has been strengthened and their contribution to childcare is valued. Improvements in training and the good information available are helping the retention and recruitment of staff. Communications between interested parties has improved using Internet sites and networks. The quality of the provision is constantly evaluated and improved through service level agreements, staff development and continued training and advice.

91. Standards achieved by children in their early learning goals are improving. Reports from schools and other providers about the work of the early years development and childcare partnership are very positive. Only a small proportion considered it had weaknesses. The main areas of concerns focus on the provision of outside areas in small schools, as well as the education of the younger pupils in mixed age classes. The authority has been very responsive to these concerns. Schools are increasingly pleased with the support they get from grounds maintenance and architects in designing and adapting buildings. In one school visited, a building project planned has been accelerated and improved so that it now includes a covered play area as well as a community room.

92. The partnership has good links across a range of organisations with the focus towards setting up and improving provision by careful and effective planning and monitoring. The service managers advise on school admissions, identification and assessment of children and works closely with social services to ensure the best provision is available. Any three-year-old child deemed to be at risk is automatically given a place in one of the funded settings.

93. Arrangements for admission to full-time school are stated clearly. Baseline assessment administered during the first term of statutory schooling is the first formal academic record. It contributes to the pupil profile, which will follow the pupil through

their school life. The assessment is comprehensive, detailed and facilitates the early identification of special educational needs or high achievement.

Support for 14-19 education

94. The education of the 14 -19 age range is very well supported by the LEA. The Education Development Plan directly and indirectly addresses the priorities for this age range through a variety of initiatives and activities that improve opportunities for both teachers and pupils and help promote higher educational standards.

95. The organisational structure of Suffolk schools in two and three-tiers causes no difficulties for the support processes that are in place. The advisory service and lead advisers for this age range have developed very effectively a number of policies, in conjunction with schools, colleges, business, the careers' service and other agencies. These encourage collaborative approaches, the sharing of information and data, and promote curricular innovations designed to sharpen the focus of schools' thinking and the provision for individual pupils.

96. There has been good and innovative support for schools seeking to apply for specialist school status. The LEA has helped to address some of the behaviour problems in the 14 -16 age range by making alternative curricular provision in Key Stage 4. This has entailed the use of disapplication procedures and programmes of co-operation with other institutions. For the more able, support has been given to critical and thinking skills, and accelerated learning methods. Support for vocational education has been promoted through work-related learning and the establishment of good relationships with the education business partnership and the local learning and skills council. The LEA supports over 500 teacher placements each year to promote professional development and a better understanding of vocational education.

97. Particular effort has been put into establishing a series of networks for teachers of pupils in the 14 -19 age range, some more effective than others, to ensure they are well informed about new national and local developments and are able to meet and collaborate with others. An example of a network that attracts two-thirds of schools is the post-16 school improvement network, whose sharing of good practices has contributed to improving A Level points scores in recent years. At local level, the collaboration between the Lowestoft schools in the Lowestoft sixth form initiative has been valuable in bringing a wide range of expertise to focus on issues there. Advisers also respond to issues in particular schools where support is needed, for example, in reviewing and monitoring the business studies provision in a school, or in improving post-16 retention rates.

98. The LEA has supported publications specific to the 14 -19 age range to promote good practice. It is able, particularly through its excellent and extensive statistical data sources, to provide schools with detailed information about specific subjects and public examination results, which allows schools to understand better their particular circumstances.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate planning

99. The council is promoting its priorities very effectively through good corporate planning processes and the leadership offered by senior officers and elected members. The policy and performance plan is a comprehensive, accessible and clear document that draws upon departmental strategic plans. It sets out a vision for improving the quality of life of the people of Suffolk and the means by which its priorities will be realised through four themes: access and community involvement; learning for life; caring and protecting; and a sustainable Suffolk. Each theme has a panel to scrutinise the achievement of the council's objectives and priorities. There is an impressive degree of consistency between the priorities set out in the four themes. Taken together, they present a coherent, ambitious and relevant plan for the community.

100. Educational objectives link most directly to the learning for life theme panel, although, in common with all council services, priorities for the education service are included throughout corporate plans. Members of the corporate management team, including the director of education, share responsibility for council wide initiatives, as well as being linked to a local area. This matrix of management responsibility is replicated for second and third-tier officers in the education department and is effective in promoting corporate cohesiveness. Good performance management systems have been developed, drawing upon the extensive range of high quality performance data that the council has maintained for a number of years. The lines of responsibility are clearly set out and members review progress in detail, both as an executive, and through the overview and scrutiny functions.

101. Elected members set out in 1998 to improve the speed and quality of decision-making. They chose to do this by embracing modernised arrangements for council business in 1999. This has proved successful, enabling speedy decisions to be taken through the exercise of powers delegated to officers, executive members and the council itself. Initial arrangements were reviewed in 2001 and revisions made. Although this has caused some disquiet amongst co-opted teacher representatives, nevertheless the changes made represent a proper separation of executive functions from scrutiny, via the theme panels, and from policy development, via the policy development panels.

102. The clear thinking that has characterised these changes in the organisation of the council is also to be found in its capacity to articulate priorities for education. It has established sound financial decision-making procedures that enable good consultation, promote schools' involvement in developing policy and result in clear budget information for schools.

103. The chief executive gives clear and effective leadership to the council's staff. She has been instrumental in translating the members' aspirations for change into sound organisational planning and structures. The director of education commands the respect of the education service. Schools, in particular, value his openness, willingness to listen and the leadership he offers. In this, he is ably supported by his senior colleagues. Collectively, they ensure that elected members receive timely,

well considered advice with options and alternatives assessed frankly. The increasing influence of Best Value practices in the operational life of the council reinforces members' need for high quality information and well-balanced advice. These they receive and use effectively. The leader of the council has led the executive well, drawing upon the expertise and knowledge of the leading members.

104. Members are committed to improving and supporting schools and many serve as governors. They maintain an appropriate strategic overview and promote the Code of Practice for LEA/School Relations. They are also active in promoting partnerships with other agencies and voluntary organisations, increasingly using cross-cutting reviews and commissions to draw together those who work in collaboration with the education department to examine new ways forward.

105. The education department enjoys good relationships with the dioceses, the health services, voluntary organisations, the police, further education establishments and the local learning and skills council. The LEA has been particularly effective in promoting the arts, ensuring that pupils have access to a wide range of artistic media though the leadership it gives to partnership working in this area.

Management services

106. The quality of the management services provided to schools is, for the most part, good. The take-up of services is very high across both the primary and secondary sectors and schools rate the LEA in the top 25 per cent of all LEAs so far inspected in respect of 20 of the 22 indicators of satisfaction with management support services. Service level agreements are in place which give clear information about what schools can expect from the variety of packages on offer. A group of headteachers, governors, elected members and officers monitor and advise on service development. Consultation with schools is well co-ordinated and the results inform service planning.

107. Support for personnel, finance and school governance is offered within a single area services package. Schools are, therefore, unaware of the costs of the different elements of the package, which prevents comparison with other potential suppliers. Although the LEA offers a very highly regarded service on procurement and purchasing, mainly of goods and equipment, relatively little information is provided on alternative providers of services.

Recommendation

- Reconsider the packaging of 'area services' so that schools know the respective costs of the different elements and have an unconstrained choice as to whether or not to purchase them.

108. **Financial support** to schools is good. Organised through the area teams, the service is valued highly by schools. They receive helpful guidance in the form of a comprehensive budget pack and a particularly useful spreadsheet to aid three-year financial planning. The telephone helpline provides prompt advice and is responsive to individual school needs. The relatively few schools in deficit have generally been

very effectively supported by the LEA in their efforts to bring the school budget back onto an even keel, and the LEA provides an extensive training programme, available for all senior managers and bursars.

109. Support to schools' **administrative information and communication technology** systems is satisfactory. The LEA developed its own systems some years ago. Once ahead of their time, they are now in need of replacement. The sensible decision to move to an integrated commercial package is understood and supported by schools and there is a clear strategy for implementation. In the meantime, there is a lengthy transitional period when technical support is often under severe strain and unable to respond to schools promptly and efficiently. Electronic communications between schools, the LEA and corporate systems are long established and under continual refinement. The LEA's early involvement and productive work with central Government in the development, for example, of the 'unique pupil number', the 'pupil level annual school census' and the 'common basic data set' make it well-placed to implement the Government's information management strategy.

110. The LEA provides effective **personnel support** to schools through the area teams, themselves supported by a small specialist unit at the centre. The manual of guidance is unsatisfactory and poorly presented, but is currently undergoing a complete revision. Schools generally have confidence in the advice the LEA offers on difficult casework issues. The area structure enables effective cross-service working between finance officers, personnel officers and advisers under the direction of the area education manager. Faced, like many authorities, with pressures on teacher recruitment, the LEA has been active in supporting schools. The LEA's induction programme for newly qualified teachers is helpful in this cause and has a deservedly high reputation.

111. The support to schools on **property** matters is variable but is usually highly competent. Very nearly all schools buy back one or other of the two packages offered by the corporate property division. The service is being reorganised with the explicit aim of becoming more customer-focused and improving further the quality of response to schools. This reorganisation has been planned in close liaison with headteachers and governors but the impact is yet to be felt across the county. Nevertheless, many schools speak highly of the advice they receive and the effectiveness of the property maintenance carried out on their behalf.

112. The **grounds maintenance** service is good. It is flexible, responsive and focuses very explicitly on the contribution it can make to improve teaching and learning. The service was a subject of a Best Value review in 2000/2001, which is reported in Appendix 3. The **cleaning** service, also the subject of a Best Value review in 2000/2001 and reported in Appendix 4, has strengths but is very variable in quality and sometimes unsatisfactory. **Home-to-school transport** is well organised and very cost-effective.

113. The LEA provides a good **catering** service, which is well regarded by schools and purchased by all but one of the secondary schools, to which the funding has been delegated. The service offers children a wide choice of food and encourages healthy eating.

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Strategy

114. The LEA has an effective and coherent policy for special educational needs (SEN) which has been developing in recent years in response to national and local priorities. There is good consultation with elected members and schools. Plans are generally well understood by schools, although there has been disquiet in some, particularly secondary schools, about the nature and speed of consultation and uncertainty about the percentage of the delegated budget for special educational needs. There is a proper emphasis on early intervention. Appropriate guidance is provided for schools on making provision for pupils with identified special needs, and for parents on how to access the provision. The provision is organised by a central service and provided via the three area teams.

115. The development of inclusive education for the majority of pupils is a major feature of the LEA's strategic plans. They are being implemented well. In addition to this, a clear role for the special schools has emerged as part of the overall provision. School improvement and raising achievement are key objectives in the Education Development Plan and these encompass the pupils with special needs alongside their peers.

116. A flexible and effective range of services is available to schools. This includes the educational psychology service, the learning support service and the sensory support services. These are generally held in high regard by the users. The services support pupils with more complex needs who are now effectively integrated into mainstream schools. The use of an external teaching advisory agency to support the inclusion policies is proving a fruitful partnership. The development of the outreach service from some special schools is also an effective part of the strategy to deploy expertise across the authority.

117. Delegated funding for children with special educational needs is consistent with the policy of providing resources for early intervention and for inclusion. The LEA, as part of the eastern region Department for Education and Skills special educational needs partnership, is committed to reducing its number of out-of-county placements. However, a lack of provision to address the needs of some pupils is hampering further reductions. The increase in the number of statements produced in the past year compared with the previous year is being monitored by the authority. It is intended that the audit of special educational needs will allow schools more provision from within their resources, thus reducing the need for statements.

Statutory obligations

118. The LEA is taking reasonable steps to fulfil its statutory obligations. Good progress has been made in producing statements within the specified time (87 per cent in 2000/2001) but there is still a relatively high proportion of exceptions created by contributors from other services not meeting the agreed time scales. In 2000/2001 56 per cent of statements were completed within 18 weeks before these exceptions were taken into account. Schools are unhappy, with some justification, about the slowness of the service.

119. There is clear guidance for schools on the criteria to be applied when placing pupils on the Suffolk assessment stages related to the Code of Practice. Panels have been established to moderate the referrals. As yet, there is little active involvement of headteachers on these panels.

120. The quality of statements is generally good. Headteachers comment that the statements provide advice, guidance and assessment allowing the development of appropriate individual education plans for each child. Annual reviews and transition reviews are held on time and have documented outcomes. A few parents feel that they are still not receiving advice and guidance to steer their choice of an appropriate placement for their child.

121. The parent partnership service has developed successfully in response to the LEA's commitment to involving parents in the decision-making about their child's educational placement. The service aims to instil confidence in the parent. In addition to the help line, group and individual advice that is offered, parents can request an independent person to help them through the statementing process.

School improvement

122. The LEA makes supporting schools in their special educational needs provision a high priority. An analysis carried out by the LEA of OFSTED inspections reflects satisfactory and often good progress for pupils with special needs. The LEA provides a wide range of courses for both mainstream and special schools and has made very good progress in training special educational needs co-ordinators and learning support assistants. The authority is supporting schools in setting targets for pupils with special needs against benchmarked data in order to monitor the progress of cohorts and individuals.

123. There is good quality support and advice provided by the learning support service and by the services for the visually and hearing impaired. The period of time that elapses between the referral to the learning support service and the meeting to discuss the referral can be up to three months. This is seen as a disadvantage to the child when a prompt response is needed. Schools similarly value the work of the education psychology service in both the consultative and assessment roles. However, some pyramid groups of schools report frequent changes of educational psychologists and discontinuity in the provision. The LEA suffers from the national and regional difficulties of recruitment and retention of educational psychologists. This limits their consultative role and schools' do not understand clearly enough their entitlement to an education psychologist's time.

Recommendation

- Ensure schools are fully aware of the services available to them provided by the education psychology service and improve response times following a referral to the learning support service.

124. The LEA is aware of limitations in the provision made for pupils with emotional and behavioural disorders. The 'first base' initiative, early intervention

strategies and the planned expansion of pupil referral unit places should help to address the situation. The role of the area support classes within the total provision is unclear and there is uncertainty at school level about their future beyond 2001, a situation which is creating tensions for staff.

Value for money

125. The services for special educational needs (SEN) provide satisfactory value for money. Total expenditure on special educational needs in 2000/2001 was a little over 16 per cent of the total local schools budget, which is close to the national average and a little more than the average for both statistical neighbours and English counties (close to 15 per cent). Spending specifically on special schools is below average.

126. Delegated funding for children with SEN is consistent with the policy of providing resources for early intervention and inclusion. However, schools are not always clear about the amount within the budget that is specifically for pupils with SEN and the LEA does not provide clear guidance. Changes to the school funding formula, which will distribute SEN funding on the basis of an audit of need, will helpfully clarify the position and will enable the authority to target resources even more effectively and transparently where they are needed.

Recommendation

- Finalise the policy on the special educational needs audit and implement it in order to make best use of resources to support pupils with special educational needs.

127. Spending on SEN is well managed at both school and LEA level. Budget monitoring and control of central expenditure are satisfactory overall, although there are variations on individual headings. The LEA monitors the impact of its funding for SEN and uses its management information systems well to evaluate the provision for SEN.

SECTION 5: ACCESS

The supply of school places

128. The planning of school places in Suffolk is good. The school organisation plan is well organised and comprehensive. It has been produced according to the required timescales and following thorough consultation. Relationships with the diocesan authorities are good and the school organisation committee is functioning effectively.

129. Following criticism by the external auditor on the reliability of pupil forecasts, the LEA made some improvements and is now introducing a more robust and transparent methodology, which has been piloted successfully. Infant classes are at 30 pupils or below, and capacity in a number of primary schools has been added to allow the reduction in class size. The LEA is capable of decisive action in difficult circumstances, as a recent closure of a special school and a primary school amalgamation demonstrate.

130. The LEA has to deal with surplus capacity in some areas and a projected shortfall in others. Its plans for doing so are satisfactory, if occasionally imprecise. The level of surplus places is above average in the primary sector and is projected to remain so in the north and west of the county. The number of primary schools with 25 per cent or more surplus places is particularly high at 23 per cent compared with 12 per cent for statistical neighbours and nationally. Most of these places are accounted for within small rural schools. The LEA undertook a significant small school closure programme in the 1980s. It has no current plans for any rural school rationalisation, largely because of the Government's stated presumption against such closures. This is a realistic approach and the LEA is right, given the high unit costs of small schools, to keep the matter under careful review.

131. While surplus capacity in the secondary sector is currently about average, the LEA faces a shortage of places in the medium term. Planning for such growth has, for the most part, been successful in the past, as the LEA has gained access to basic need allocations. It has avoided the widespread use of temporary accommodation. Future plans are well formulated and based on increasingly reliable data.

132. The LEA has made the reasonable decision, in the light of its own evidence, not to reorganise school provision in order to secure a single age of transfer across the county. A three-tier system, with transfers at nine and 13, operates in about 60 per cent of the county and a two-tier system, with transfer at 11, in the rest. The LEA has demonstrated that, on the basis of comprehensive pupil attainment data collected over a long period, the difference between the two systems in terms of standards of pupil achievement by the end of Key Stage 4 is marginal and any change not worth the upheaval and significant capital costs that would be involved.

Admissions

133. Admissions arrangements are currently unsatisfactory, principally because this year the LEA was unable to handle adequately the volume of appeals. Until the

current year, however, the LEA had a good record on admissions. In 2000, 96 per cent of pupils received a place in the school of their first choice, compared with 93 per cent nationally, and in previous years the relatively low number of appeals for the September entry were always heard by the end of the summer term.

134. This year saw the number of appeals for September admissions increase by 144 per cent, with the result that a significant minority had still not been heard by the end of the summer term and, in some cases, by well into the autumn term. This was due to a marked increase in both the number of late applications from parents moving into the catchment area of oversubscribed schools and the number of parents expressing a preference for non-catchment area schools.

135. The LEA did not anticipate these trends, nor did it respond exceptionally to the changed pattern. The LEA chose not to establish an admissions forum as admissions was not seen as a contentious issue. Arrangements are now in hand for a forum to be convened in autumn 2001. Steps are also being taken to improve arrangements in 2002 with the appointment of additional staff and changes to the admissions timetable.

136. The information for parents on admissions is satisfactory and in most respects complies with the admissions Code of Practice. There are areas where it can be improved: for example, there is no guidance on choosing a school and the importance of stating a preference is not clearly explained. There is a plethora of different application forms and parents are required to obtain a separate form if they wish to apply for place at a school other than the one serving their catchment area. Parents' views on the admissions process were sought in a helpful and comprehensive survey in 1997, but there are no ongoing arrangements for gauging parental satisfaction.

137. Many schools have standard numbers and resulting planned admission numbers that make planning and organisation difficult at school level. For some schools, the LEA, though clearly constrained by the law, is inflexible in its approach to this issue.

Recommendation

- Improve admissions policy and practice, taking into account any new arrangements brought forward by central government, following a thorough review undertaken by the newly convened admissions forum.

Asset management

138. Arrangements for asset management planning are good. Condition and suitability surveys were completed on time and arrangements are in place to maintain the database. Comprehensive information underpins the five-year plans provided for each school and the overall five-year maintenance plan for the authority. Some schools have found the information difficult to use because of a lack of clarity in its presentation. The methodology adopted for overall prioritisation is undeveloped.

139. The school buildings visited during the inspection generally provided accommodation of good quality. Years of sound investment in the building stock and careful prioritisation predating the current asset management plan, have meant that the LEA has no backlog of urgent maintenance work.

140. The LEA has been proactive in seeking capital funding from a variety of sources and is supportive in practical ways of schools' individual efforts to increase investment. A number of projects have been successfully implemented using partnering arrangements with private contractors. For the most part, major capital building projects have been managed well and schools have been involved closely in project development from the design stage onwards.

Provision of education otherwise than at school

141. The LEA has a sound strategy and firm plans for providing suitable, alternative education for pupils who require it because of exclusion, because of illness or for other reasons. The new policy document is very effective in defining a complicated area of work, drawing the many strands together and mapping out provision for the future.

142. For excluded pupils, the pupil referral units offer a balanced curriculum, with alternative curricula, work experience and college courses in appropriate cases. At present the PRUs cannot accommodate all those pupils referred so that other forms of tuition must be used instead. Plans to increase pupil referral units places are well under way. The provision for excluded pupils equates to 15 hours of tuition on average and the planned expansion will allow Government targets for full-time education to be met before September 2002. The referral system is efficient and well understood by schools. Pupils are generally placed quickly and their progress and attendance subsequently monitored. However, reintegration is the LEA's first aim and procedures have been strengthened with this object. Reintegration rates are currently good, the majority of excluded pupils are successfully reintegrated into mainstream schools.

143. There is a suitable range of group and individual tuition for pupils prevented from attending ordinary schools because of emotional and medical conditions, including residential placements and hospital classes. Strong links are maintained with health and social services. There is good provision for school age mothers that responds to their varying support needs. The arrangements for identifying children being educated by parents at home are reasonable and there is a thorough system for monitoring their progress and offering curriculum advice.

Attendance

144. Attendance in Suffolk as a whole is good. It is consistently better than in similar authorities and well above national averages in both primary and secondary schools. The support for maintaining good attendance is satisfactory and has many strengths, although there is some variation in the quality and suitability of the approaches between schools and areas. The LEA is well aware of this and has commissioned its own evaluation. It has taken steps to redefine its role and is further considering the structure of the educational welfare service (EWS). Although

the service is soundly organised for its present purposes, a clear strategy for the future has yet to be determined. The EWS has re-orientated its efforts towards monitoring and tackling unauthorised absence. It has sharpened its referral system and has become more rigorous in taking legal action when called for. It has produced good quality, and very comprehensive, guidance for schools and parents. Time is allocated to schools according to attendance records. These measures are sufficient for much of the county and the majority of schools are satisfied with the service.

145. However, there are areas of social disadvantage in which attendance is a major challenge facing schools. Unauthorised absence in these areas has proved an unreliable indicator of the need for support because of the high incidence of parent complicity. EWS has helped schools to reveal this problem through truancy sweeps, in which absences of all kinds are investigated by additional educational welfare officers, drafted in for the purpose. Several of the schools visited in such areas felt that an excessive concentration on unauthorised absence has left them with less support than formerly to meet these circumstances. Some have set up additional mechanisms of their own and the EWS is keen to find ways of enabling them. Further, detailed consultation, directly with the schools, regarding alternative models for the work of the EWS that are more sensitive to local needs has yet to be undertaken.

Behaviour support

146. The strategy for supporting schools in managing behaviour is clear and the planning is good. Developments in services have not entirely kept abreast of the implementation of inclusive policies on the ground. The situation was exacerbated by the closure in 1999, with reason, of a school for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Nevertheless, good progress is being made and support overall is satisfactory. The behaviour support plan is comprehensive and includes challenging targets for improvement. The rates of permanent exclusion have compared favourably in both primary and secondary schools with those found in similar LEAs and nationally in recent years. Last year, however, they did not keep pace with national improvements. The LEA is keenly aware of this and has increased its support to schools in coping with emotional and behavioural difficulties, concentrating appropriately on those areas of disadvantage where the trend is most apparent.

147. Good quality advice and training are available to schools on behaviour management and, where appropriate, help in assessing pupils' needs and supporting them directly. A number of agencies are involved, including the area teams' advisory teachers, the educational psychology service, the education welfare service and independent consultants appointed by the LEA. Inclusion co-ordinators in each area provide valued consultancy and negotiation regarding the provision to be made for pupils. The LEA supports schools in setting up worthwhile projects of their own, aimed at coping with immediate crises, modifying attitudes, re-engaging disaffected pupils and preventing exclusion. A number of secondary schools have organised learning support units, which are evaluated systematically.

148. A major plank of the LEA's strategy to make good the shortfall in support is the broadening of the role of the pupil referral units (PRUs). The 'first base' for Key Stage 1 pupils, operating in one area, is a model of good practice. Those pupils who attend usually remain on their school registers and are reintegrated in due course. In addition, first base teachers use their expertise preventatively, working in the mainstream in partnership with the schools. Another first base is planned and there will soon be two similarly organised facilities for Key Stages 2 and 3, one of which is ready to open. The Key Stage 4 PRUs, in varying degrees, already offer, as well as placements for excluded pupils, alternative curricula, college courses and dual registered placements. Support within the mainstream is at an early stage, but each PRU has recently appointed an additional outreach teacher. From the evidence of the school visits, schools are not always fully aware of how the role of PRUs is intended to develop and there will need to be further discussion between the parties to ensure that the outreach complements the existing support in schools.

Health, safety, welfare and child protection

149. The LEA provides good support to schools in this area and takes reasonable steps to meet its statutory responsibilities. For both health and safety and child protection, the LEA monitors to ensure that schools have designated officers and that training is up-to-date. The good county policy for health and safety and the published guidance to schools is very thorough. The procedures for dealing with a variety of emergencies are particularly useful. Governors are well supported in their responsibilities for risk assessment. LEA officers make occasional checks of their own and are rigorous in monitoring safety issues related to building work in progress.

150. The LEA plays a full part in the area child protection committee, a body that is very active and is a good example of joint working. The extensive training is provided by both education and social services staff. The joint procedures for child protection for schools, the tuition facilities and other services are detailed and comprehensive. The education welfare service produces a training pack for schools, which is highly accessible and would be worth developing as a first point of written reference. Communications between services is good at the senior level, every effort is being made to develop strong structures locally, with a named social worker for every school, and an interdisciplinary monitoring group based on every pyramid of schools.

151. The child protection procedures, including those for coping with emergencies, are well defined and the school visits showed that they are generally effective. Occasionally, the initial advice a school received was less than authoritative or it was difficult to access a social worker quickly. The difficulty is that, as elsewhere in the country, there are shortages of social workers in some areas. The situation will continue to need close monitoring by the partners and is a factor to bear in mind in any proposals for restructuring the education welfare service.

Children in public care

152. The LEA meets fully its statutory requirements in relation to children in public care and the quality of support is good. The council is strongly committed to its role as corporate parent. The services involved have published high standards for care

which, together with a very good Quality Protects management action plan, ensures that all relevant services within the authority have clearly defined roles and a firm agenda for continuing improvement. The LEA has further defined its contribution in a recently adopted and extremely useful policy statement. Education and social services work closely together at all levels. Each has contributed to the training of the other and a number of important posts are held jointly. Liaison between education and care facilities is good and rigorous standards are set in monitoring placements outside the county.

153. Comprehensive data have been assembled, including attainment data, and carefully analysed. Challenging targets have been set for attainment at each key stage, for attendance and the reduction of exclusion. There are sound arrangements for the sharing of data between the services and with schools. There is clear evidence of improvement and the LEA has set up awards to celebrate achievement. There is a useful joint project with local children's charitable organisations to assist young people at the point of leaving care and social services has published helpful guidance for them.

154. Designated teachers in the schools have been trained and comprehensive guidance has been issued. All those visited were aware of the procedures and had submitted the required information to the LEA. Most schools have already produced the personal education plans for their pupils and the LEA has taken suitable steps to monitor progress and ensure that targets for their production are met. Although the procedures are generally well understood in schools, there are occasional uncertainties about the precise purposes of the personal education plans and occasional difficulties in liaising with a social worker.

Minority ethnic children, including Travellers

155. Good support is provided overall for children of minority ethnic groups, including Travellers, by the multicultural education service and the Traveller education service. The Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant action plan builds effectively on the Education Development Plan, setting out clear objectives for improvement. Only 3.2 per cent of the school population is from a minority ethnic group, around a quarter of the national proportion. Last year 583 out of a total of 912 pupils with English as an additional language received support in 115 schools. Out of a recorded population of 565 Traveller children, 196 were supported. The children are widely scattered over a large county and the services are organised accordingly. There are well-designed referral systems and the tracking of Traveller movements is done meticulously. For both groups, their response to requests for support from schools is very prompt and the services make an immediate assessment of individual needs. The multicultural education service has long monitored the language competence of supported pupils at baseline and every two years thereafter.

156. Attainment, attendance and exclusion data for each ethnic group have been improved as an Education Development Plan priority and are now comprehensive. This year a helpful analysis was issued to all schools to provide benchmarking for schools to set individual and group targets. Traveller children's attendance and progress are also recorded systematically and passed efficiently between schools.

157. Three-quarters of the grant for English as an additional language is devolved to schools and the relatively small central team assists in the appointment of staff and by offering training and advice for teachers and assistants. The multicultural education service has been involved in the training for the literacy strategy and for special educational needs. The funding for the Traveller education service is wholly and sensibly retained, so the support teachers can be deployed where they are needed. Learning support assistants are assigned to schools closest to Traveller sites. Good guidance is issued to schools for both groups and there are useful teaching and resource materials, some available for loan from a resource base. A translation service is available and can usually respond at short notice. Schools generally praise the quality of support.

Gifted and talented children

158. The strategy for supporting able and gifted pupils has many strengths and good progress is being made in implementing it. The Education Development Plan signalled a major drive to improve practice in schools and enhance the established enrichment activities, courses and summer schools in mathematics, sport, drama, dance, music. A dedicated Education Development Plan team was set up in April 2000 since when developments have been rapid. Virtually all schools have been represented at the school improvement forum conferences on this theme and many schools have received training, centrally or in-house, for teachers and subject specialists. Advisers have been nominated to co-ordinate in each area and they, and all the link advisers, have been trained. Action research projects have been established in a number of schools and others have set up their own initiatives. A substantial number of schools have nominated teachers and co-ordinators for able pupils and some 65 attended the first meeting of the network established this year.

159. Practice is changing in schools, as was indicated by the school visits. There is raised awareness of the implications for teaching, learning and planning. More schools are nominating pupils for LEA enrichment activities and some are setting up their own activities. Where teachers have been able to attend master classes with their pupils, there has been useful follow-up in schools, adding to the value of the courses. While the benefits are intended to be for the long term, and in a wide variety of subjects and interests, the data shows that there have been marked increases in the proportions of pupils gaining the higher levels in the national curriculum tests over the last two years.

160. The next steps are to build the able pupils' dimension into the regular school self review process in collaboration with link advisers, to set up pupil databases to aid monitoring and to improve the information and advice for parents. All these are in the Education Development Plan team's planning.

Measures to combat racism

161. Suffolk has clear policies on race equality and takes effective action to promote them. The support to schools is good. The LEA has made a positive response to the (Macpherson) report of the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence and has set up a well-documented system for recording racist incidents.

Indeed, it was among the first to do so, and the system is now in its seventh year. Schools receive annually a detailed analysis of all incidents to help in planning their own approaches. Several headteachers spoke of its usefulness. The LEA works closely with the council for racial equality and applies its standards appropriately to other policies, such as that for social inclusion. It supports schools in consulting parents and improving the understanding of cultural groups and their aspirations. The multicultural education service undertakes effective training for governors and teachers on multicultural issues and produces good promotional materials and curriculum advice.

Promoting social inclusion

162. Suffolk accords great importance to combating social exclusion. Education is a major contributor to the council's corporate strategy for social inclusion for working with the community in a concerted way. A draft equalities policy analyses the varied causes of exclusion and their relevance to all the council's services. The schools visited were aware, to an unusual degree, of the influence of corporate policy on education. Social inclusion features strongly in the Education Development Plan priorities and there is reliable evidence that they are being pursued vigorously.

163. The LEA monitors achievement systematically and has analysed performance among different groups of pupils. It has worked with the council for racial equality to develop targets for ethnic groups. It has a close knowledge of the kinds of social and economic disadvantage peculiar to Suffolk and has targeted a range of relevant initiatives accordingly, working closely with community education, the parent partnership, social services, the health service, police and other outside agencies. The behaviour support plan and policies for supporting ethnic minorities and children in public care are well integrated with the social agenda. The strategy is well co-ordinated, despite its complexity, with an officer appointed specifically for this purpose. Furthermore, under a project funded by the Department for Education and Skills, an index for social inclusion is being developed, against which to measure a LEA's services comprehensively.

164. The full range of initiatives is beyond the scope of this report, but for example, in one secondary school visited in a deprived area the LEA had helped to write an inclusion action plan for raising standards, improve attendance and reduce exclusion. It supported the appointment of one of its own experienced former advisory teachers to the senior management team as inclusion co-ordinator. An inclusion unit had been set up to provide respite and an alternative curriculum, with a LEA contribution to fund the staffing. A parent partnership officer works independently in the school each week supporting parents, and there are group activities for parents in the evenings.

165. In a primary school, a breakfast club has been established with health service support, a reading partnership scheme operates with support from a local firm, a counsellor funded from the Single Regeneration Budget supports at-risk pupils, and local businesses co-operate in raising attendance. In an infant school where pupils arrive at school with under-developed language skills, the LEA has supported the school in setting up parent-and-toddler groups and nurture groups and has provided family literacy training for parents. These measures have contributed

to significant improvements in standards. Family learning, including literacy, numeracy and parenting skills, featured in several schools and participants often attested to the extremely good quality of the tutoring.

APPENDIX 1: THE BEST VALUE REVIEW OF THE SCHOOL LIBRARY SERVICE

166. The Best Value review of the school library service (SLS) began in September 2000 and was completed in June 2001. It was effective in encouraging both the LEA and schools to consider what the SLS does well and where improvements need to be made. The review identified particularly the need for dialogue about future models of service provision. With hindsight, the review might have encompassed a wider context than only the SLS, which would have presented greater challenge and allowed a more critical review of competing methods of provision. The LEA is aware that the tight focus on the SLS limited the scope of a review of overlapping functions, and is now taking steps to look at services to children in ways that are more radical.

167. The review considered the current work of the SLS, with its 2000/2001 budget of £504,000, and a staff of 16.8 full-time equivalent librarians and support staff. The review began just as a new service manager was appointed, and the review was able to run parallel to (and effectively become) a business planning process, identifying priorities and an action plan. The steering group's strategy was to define the service's major weaknesses and how to resolve these, using the Best Value methodology. The review had some difficulties in comparing provision with other providers, since national benchmarking for SLS is in its infancy, and so the LEA made sensible use of data from the department of information science at Loughborough University to compare Suffolk with six comparators. This exercise identified that the size of the Suffolk book fund is an important weakness of the SLS, compounded by historical budget cuts.

168. The consultation exercise with schools showed the service was valued by its customers but that the quality of administration is seriously hampered by a lack of information and communication technology provision. The support of the SLS to curriculum development was seen by some schools as being insufficient, whilst those that chose not to purchase the standard 'buy back' service felt it was not good value for money. The LEA has already taken steps to address these points, and these constitute part of the challenge, requiring sensitive adjustments to income streams and services to improve efficiency.

169. The issue of competition for the service was considered thoroughly. Although there is no equivalent to the SLS in the private sector, the review looked at the advantages and disadvantages of providing the SLS within Suffolk County Council, and identified significant benefits to schools and the service being provided on a delegated budget basis. The review concluded that the SLS makes an important contribution to the LEA's Education Development Plan. It further concluded that, subject to improvements already identified, the SLS provides a good service, customer demand is high and as a trading unit, it is successful. In its recommendation that the SLS should consider the benefits of partnerships and joint arrangements with other SLSs and commercial providers, the review implicitly recognised that the context of the review might now have been more effectively set in a wider framework of complementary functions providing services for children.

170. The SLS is a good service. The review led to a plan that was realistic and appropriately focused on service improvements. It has been built into the service's business planning very effectively and has promising prospects for improvement.

APPENDIX 2: THE BEST VALUE REVIEW OF GROUNDS MAINTENANCE

171. The review covers the work of the county grounds service. Although a service is provided to some other customers, for example, social services and the police, more than 80 per cent of the work relates to schools and the service is managed from within the education department. The council chose to review grounds maintenance in the first year, along with cleaning/caretaking, since both these services were in the process of transition from the previous compulsory competitive tendering regime.

172. The aims of the service are very clearly and explicitly related to the council's strategic aims and values. An ambitious vision is set out, which is focused clearly on the needs of children and the contribution that the service can make to the effective delivery of the curriculum. The service aims to be proactive, rather than simply responsive, and emphasises school and pupil participation.

173. These challenging aims are very largely translated into practice. This is borne out by the very positive ratings in the authority's own review survey and in the school survey conducted for the inspection. Satisfaction, indeed real enthusiasm, for the service was echoed in the schools visited during the inspection and by a focus group of service users. There are numerous examples, not just of efficient and responsive routine maintenance by well-motivated staff, but of exciting projects enhancing the school environment and contributing positively to teaching and learning.

174. The performance of the service compares well with other providers. This is reflected in benchmarking information against other councils and a number of service users reported that when they had tested the market, the county grounds service provided the best value for money.

175. The service has clearly embraced a culture of continuous improvement at all levels and the Best Value review was approached in that context. The service has effectively challenged the areas of work it covers: staffing has been reduced to cover core functions with other specialist activities out-sourced. Consultation was undertaken with all service users and staff by questionnaire and the Best Value working group made site visits.

176. The improvement plan includes a number of practical activities, which will result in continued improvement for service users. Some actions and performance indicators are too imprecise and some action points are no more than activities that would have been undertaken routinely. Nevertheless, this is a good service that has promising prospects to continue to improve as a result of the review.

APPENDIX 3: THE BEST VALUE REVIEW OF CARETAKING AND CLEANING

177. The review covers county caretaking and cleaning services, a service unit operating within the education department. Around 70 per cent of work is carried out in schools: this principally covers the cleaning function, although schools can buy into an insurance policy, which provides relief caretakers. The council chose to undertake an early review of two services (this one and grounds maintenance) emerging from the compulsory competitive tendering framework. This was reasonable, particularly as there was concern about cleaning services, where staff morale was low and there was evidence of poor quality and a lack of customer focus. However, the single and limited scope of the review meant that issues raised could not be considered in the wider context of facilities management across the council.

178. The aims of the service are well focused on providing a clean and safe working and learning environment and are related explicitly to corporate and departmental aims. The service has analysed its place in the market and recognises that some schools will wish to organise their own cleaning and others will purchase the service from an alternative contractor. For many schools, however, neither of these options is feasible or desirable due to the local employment position and the county cleaning service perceives, rightly, it has an obligation to provide a quality service in these circumstances.

179. Although evidence from school visits and from a focus group of service users suggests that performance has improved, the quality is still too variable. The Audit Commission survey showed that 31 per cent of secondary schools and 11 per cent of primary schools regarded the service as poor or very poor. However, schools rate the LEA in the top 25 per cent of all LEAs so far inspected in respect of this function. In some cases, the council is unable to deliver the specification, principally because of recruitment difficulties but there are many examples of the council taking practical, innovative action to provide a good service in difficult circumstances.

180. Service costs have been compared against the British Institute of Cleaning Science comparators. They compare satisfactorily on overheads, materials and equipment but labour costs are higher.

181. The review process was carried out conscientiously and based on a wide range of evidence. The service operates entirely within a competitive framework and the lessons of each tendering exercise are carefully analysed. The review team undertook a thorough comparison of costs and working practices with other local authorities and three private schools. Further benchmarking is now being undertaken with a range of other councils through a national association. Reasonable steps were taken to consult service users through a survey of site representatives of all buildings and follow-up visits to a sample. Staff were involved in the review through a questionnaire, meetings and the participation of the staff consultative committee.

182. The challenge element of the review was weak. Having determined that the service will be required by a substantial number of schools, challenge was applied primarily to operational methods. More profound issues of the structure for service

delivery, including linking with other services and externalisation, were raised but then avoided.

183. The improvement plan includes some useful practical actions, particularly in respect of improving the recruitment and retention of staff, but too many of the action points simply referred to routine good management practice. Partly because of the single focus of the review and the avoidance of consideration of major structural issues, the improvement plan does not propose action that will lead to a significant change in performance. In summary, this is a fair service that has uncertain prospects to improve substantially as a result of the review.

Recommendation

- Reconsider the performance and organisation of the caretaking and cleaning services in the context of the forthcoming broader Best Value review of council support services.

APPENDIX 4: RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to build on its strong management practices and the effective provision of services, the LEA should:

1. Improve admissions policy and practice, taking into account any new arrangements brought forward by central government, following a thorough review undertaken by the newly convened admissions forum.
2. Provide appropriate guidance and training to schools on the application of Best Value principles and monitor school performance in this area.
3. Reconsider the packaging of 'area services' so that schools know the respective costs of the different elements and have an unconstrained choice as to whether or not to purchase them.
4. Finalise the policy on the special educational needs audit and implement it in order to make best use of resources to support pupils with special educational needs.
5. Ensure schools are fully aware of the services available to them provided by the education psychology service and improve service response times following a referral to the learning support service.
6. Ensure that the precise nature of LEA concerns about a school of concern is communicated clearly and the purposes of additional funds are agreed in all schools.
7. Reconsider the performance and organisation of the caretaking and cleaning services in the context of the forthcoming broader Best Value review of council support services.

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