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IN EDUCATION

**INSPECTION OF
SANDWELL
LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

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**OFFICE OF HER MAJESTY'S CHIEF INSPECTOR OF SCHOOLS
in conjunction with the
AUDIT COMMISSION**

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APPENDIX 1: RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection of Sandwell local education authority (LEA) 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 (December 2001). The inspection focused on the effectiveness of the LEA's work to support school improvement. The inspection took account of the Local Government Act 1999, insofar as it relates to work undertaken by the LEA on Best Value. The previous inspection of the LEA took place in spring 2000.

2. The inspection was based on a range of material, which included self-evaluation undertaken by the LEA, and data, some of which was provided by the LEA. That material also included school inspection information; HMI monitoring reports and audit reports and documentation from the LEA. Discussions were held with LEA officers; officers from other local authority services; elected members; focus groups of headteachers, teachers and partners of the LEA. In addition the inspection took account of the earlier OFSTD/Audit Commission reports published in 1998 and 2000. A questionnaire, seeking the views on aspects of the work of the LEA, was circulated to 124 schools and the inspection team considered its results. The response rate to the questionnaire was 73 per cent.

COMMENTARY

3. The metropolitan borough of Sandwell is characterised by a falling population and worsening relative levels of deprivation. It is the most deprived borough in the West Midlands and there are no significant areas of affluence within its boundaries. The ethnic population is diverse and accounts for 24 per cent of the school age population; this is twice the national average.

4. Educational standards remain below national and statistical neighbour averages in all Key Stages. The council and the recently restructured education and lifelong learning department recognises this and is striving in partnership with schools to raise aspirations and expectations. The last two years have seen attainment improve more quickly than the national rate for 11 and 16 year olds.

5. The last two inspections of the LEA, although positive in some areas, identified serious weaknesses. Poor partnership with schools, inadequate leadership and opaque decision making led to a loss of confidence and trust in the LEA by schools. The last inspection in 2000 concluded that the LEA did not have the capacity to resolve these weaknesses unassisted. An interim management team was appointed and made an effective start on building a sound basis for improvement. A new management team was in place, appointed by the council, in September 2001. It has built successfully on the foundations laid by the interim management to set a clear vision for improvement which schools and other partners of the LEA understand and believe in.

6. Education is at the heart of Sandwell's corporate vision and strategy to regenerate the borough. Capable and well informed political leadership and committed and dedicated officers are demonstrating a clear desire to work in partnership with schools and other stakeholders to effect school improvement and promote school autonomy. There is optimism and shared common purpose. From its low starting point in 2000 the LEA has done much to improve the quality of its services and functions and progress has been considerable in a relatively short space of time.

7. Overall, the LEA now performs the majority of its functions at a satisfactory level and strengths outweigh weaknesses. Nevertheless, few functions are good and there remains a small number, which are not yet adequate. The LEA recognises that there is still much to be done if it is to meet its own high expectations. It knows its own strengths and weaknesses and is not complacent. A commitment to continuous improvement is clearly evident in its approach to Best Value processes and performance management at all levels.

8. The following functions are exercised particularly effectively:

- the leadership provided for education by senior officers and elected members;
- the transparency and effectiveness of decision making;
- the quality of advice given to elected members;

- partnership working including partnership with schools; and
- support for children in public care.

The following functions are not performed adequately:

- the provision for pupils who have no school place;
- support for school attendance;
- statutory requirements in relation to child protection;
- grounds maintenance; and
- catering.

9. The LEA has made highly satisfactory progress since the last inspection. This is especially the case in relation to corporate issues, aspects of school improvement and special educational needs. Progress related to aspects of social inclusion has not been adequate.

10. Central to the improvement made by the LEA is the leadership provided by the executive director. Headteachers and others interviewed now have an increased optimism and sense of partnership and which were prominently absent in the last inspection. Nevertheless, structures are relatively new and plans are at a very early stage of implementation and evidence of significant impact is not yet apparent. The coherence of planning, and, in particular, the sound school improvement programme together with the appropriate targeting of resources to priorities, make the potential for improvement promising. The LEA has demonstrated that its capacity to respond positively to the recommendations made in this report is good.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

11. Sandwell's population has been falling over the last 20 years and now stands at 288,400. The relative level of deprivation in the authority has worsened. Sandwell is the most deprived borough in the West Midlands and there are no areas of affluence within its boundaries.

12. The proportion of pupils in Sandwell schools from minority ethnic groups (23.9 per cent) is about twice the national average with the largest groups being those of Indian and African Caribbean heritage. The percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals in primary schools and secondary schools (25.3 and 24.8 per cent respectively) is well above the national average. The percentage of pupils of primary and secondary school age with a statement of special educational need in 2000 (2.4 and 3.8 per cent respectively) was below the national rates.

13. There were 27,800 pupils on roll in Sandwell primary schools in January 2002. Since 1999 there has been a decline in primary pupil numbers of 2 per cent which is projected to continue by approximately 6 per cent over the next five years. Surplus places in primary schools are currently 8 per cent but are projected to fall to 6 per cent by 2002/3. There were 18,529 pupils in secondary schools in January 2002. Since 1999 there has been an increase of 12.5 per cent in secondary aged pupil numbers and this is set to continue in the short term. An 8.4 per cent surplus capacity in secondary schools is projected to reduce to 6 per cent by 2002/3. Currently four secondary schools have surplus capacity of over 25 per cent. Pupil mobility is a significant issue in 15 per cent of Sandwell primary schools.

14. Sandwell has 124 schools, compared to 138 in 1998. There are 100 primary schools and 19 secondary schools, of which two have foundation status. A reorganisation of special schools, which took place in 2000, has reduced the number from 11 to five: three-day schools and two residential schools. Seventy-eight of the 90 primary schools with Key Stage 1 pupils have nursery provision, and the proportion of under fives at nursery or in primary schools is 90 per cent which is one of the highest in England.

Performance

15. Educational standards have risen since the last inspection but remain below national and statistical neighbours averages in all Key Stages. OFSTED inspection data indicates that attainment on entry to Sandwell primary schools is lower than in statistical neighbours and considerably lower than the national average.

16. In 2001, at Key Stage 1 the proportion of pupils achieving Level 2 and above was below the average for statistical neighbours and well below the national average in reading, writing and mathematics. Rates of improvement in the National Curriculum (NC) tests over the last three years have been broadly in line with the national trend and statistical neighbours averages.¹

17. In 2001, the proportion of pupils achieving Level 4 and above in the NC tests at Key Stage 2 in English (66 per cent) was well below the national average and below the average for statistical neighbours. In mathematics (65 per cent) attainment was below the national average but broadly in line with the statistical neighbours' average. In science (82 per cent) attainment was also below the national and statistical neighbours average. Rates of improvement over the last three years are above the national trend in English and well above in mathematics and science. When compared with statistical neighbour trends, the rate of improvement is above in all three subjects.

18. In 2001 at Key Stage 3, the proportion of pupils achieving Level five or above in the NC tests was well below the national average in English, mathematics and science. When compared with statistical neighbours, attainment is broadly in line for English but below average in mathematics and science. Rates of improvement have mirrored the national picture over the last three years. When compared with statistical neighbour trends, the rates of improvement are in line for English and science but below average in mathematics.

19. In 2001 the percentage of pupils achieving five or more A*-C grades at GCSE (34 per cent) was well below the national average but broadly in line with the average for statistical neighbours. The percentage of pupils achieving one or more grades A*-G grades at GCSE (92 per cent) was well below the national average and below the statistical neighbour average. Pupils' average point score was below the national average but broadly in line with the statistical neighbour average. Over the period from 1997 to 2001, the rate of improvement for pupils achieving five or more A*-C grades was above the national and statistical neighbour trends. For those achieving one or more A*-G grades it was broadly in line with the national trend, but below that of statistical neighbours. Average point scores were broadly in line with both national and statistical neighbour trends.

20. Ofsted inspection data indicates that the percentage of primary schools judged to be good or very good in Sandwell is well below the national average, and below statistical neighbour averages. The percentage of good or very good secondary schools is also below the national average, but broadly in line with the statistical neighbour average. In primary schools inspected twice by OFSTED, there has been some improvement in the quality of education, the schools' climate and the management and efficiency of schools. Inspectors judged there

¹ Sandwell's statistical neighbours are Barking and Dagenham, Kingston upon Hull, Coventry, Middlesborough, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Stoke-on-Trent, Walsall and Wolverhampton.

to be an overall reduction in the number of schools requiring much improvement in these three areas. The picture is much the same in secondary schools inspected twice by OFSTED (ten schools), with a slight overall improvement.

21. In 2001, permanent exclusions in the primary sector were broadly in line with national figures though in the secondary sector they were well above. Attendance was well below the national figures for both primary and secondary schools. Unauthorised absence was broadly in line with the national figures for primary and secondary schools.

22. Three Sandwell primary schools and one high school have been awarded Beacon status. There are currently six schools requiring special measures (one high school and five primary schools). There are two primary schools designated as having serious weaknesses.

Funding

23. Though only slightly lower than its statistical neighbours, the Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) per pupil in Sandwell for 2001-02 was in the lowest quartile for metropolitan authorities at only 91 per cent of the average. The council as a whole spends well above SSA. Education has been funded at a level marginally above SSA in each of the last two financial years and there is a commitment to passing to education any increases in SSA over the next two years. While education has a prominent position in council planning and is seen as the key driver in the bid to regenerate Sandwell, funding is a little lower than for some other services relative to their respective SSA.

24. Nevertheless, council funding ensured that the local schools budget (LSB) for primary schools in 2001-02 was close to the average for metropolitan authorities, while the secondary school LSB was slightly above the average. Since 2001-02, the LEA has delegated a high proportion of funds to schools, so that funding per pupil in primary, secondary and special individual schools budgets (ISB) is well above average for metropolitan authorities and similar to the average for all English LEAs.

25. As a consequence of the high level of delegation, funding retained centrally by the LEA is low. However, strategic management costs are well above average; a major contributor at £55 per pupil in 2001-02 is the high cost of new and existing redundancies and early retirements. The centrally retained budget for SEN and access are close to the average for Sandwell's statistical neighbours, but an unusually high proportion of the access budget is devoted to the outdoor and environmental education. At £16 per pupil, the budget for school improvement is particularly low.

26. The council, its education service and individual schools are becoming increasingly successful in gaining access to additional funding from a variety of

sources. The LEA attracted a total of £46.9m in 2001-02, compared with £21.5m the previous year, though some of the new funding will span two or more years. Much of the funding appropriately targets the issues of regeneration and social inclusion. Together with its partners, the council is the only authority in England to have made successful bids in all rounds of the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB).

27. In 2000-2001, the LEA was unable to find the necessary match funding to enable it to draw upon its full allocation from the Standards Fund. This difficulty has now been resolved. Nevertheless, total Standards Fund in 2001-02 (£248 per pupil) was more than 20 per cent lower than the average for Sandwell's statistical neighbours. Income from other specific grants was well above average.

28. The LEA has been particularly successful in attracting capital grants. The total capital expenditure budget per pupil for 2001-02 was £316, more than 30 per cent higher than the average for Sandwell's statistical neighbours.

Council structure

29. Since the last inspection the council has embraced the modernising agenda and has moved to a leader and cabinet arrangement. Education and lifelong learning has a cabinet advisory team with a cabinet member supported by two advisers; the team meets 11 times a year. There is also an education and lifelong learning scrutiny committee. Its terms of reference include the evaluation of schools, monitoring the operation of the local management of schools scheme and links with external agencies.

30. The political make-up of the council is 57 Labour, seven Liberal Democrat, seven Conservative and one independent.

31. The second OFSTED inspection of the LEA, which reported in March 2000, noted that restructuring of the education department had been slow and was incomplete. Following that inspection, consultants were called in and recommended that the authority, in co-operation with the then DfEE, explore interim management arrangements for education. An interim management team, on contract to a private sector provider, was appointed to take up post in September 2000 and carried out a review and restructuring of the staffing establishment of education and lifelong learning. Recruitment for new third tier posts began in November 2000 and the majority of new staffing arrangements, including posts below third tier, were in place by the end of May 2001. A new executive director of education and lifelong learning was appointed in September 2001 along with a new head of inclusion and access. Interim arrangements involving a private sector provider continue for the head of school improvement. A permanent appointment has yet to be made following a second advertisement.

32. The executive director for education and lifelong learning heads the current structure, with three heads of service who manage respectively school improvement, strategy and lifelong learning, and inclusion and access. A team of operational unit managers supports each head of service.

The LEA strategy for school improvement

33. The quality of planning for 2001-2 (year 3 of the first EDP) was an improvement on earlier years and the rate of progress in implementing actions has begun to increase. The findings of this inspection largely agree with the LEA's own evaluation that, overall, despite some variation, satisfactory progress has been made in implementing the eight priorities in EDP1. The LEA has made good progress in meeting its targets for Key Stages 2 and 4, for children in public care and in improving the data to allow resources to be targeted more effectively in a number of the priorities. In a number of areas, such as the recruitment and retention of teachers and continuing professional development, innovative strategies are in place. However progress in attendance has been unsatisfactory. Despite satisfactory progress, too many schools remain in formal OFSTED categories and a small number of the weakest schools are making insufficient progress. The LEA recognises that there has been variable progress in implementing the priority of improving leadership and management in schools.

34. The last inspection of the LEA identified a number of weaknesses in the EDP and concluded that the plan was unsatisfactory overall. Crucially, consultation with schools was inadequate; schools saw little in the plan that was relevant to their needs. Good progress has been made in addressing these weaknesses. EDP2 has been agreed by the council and approved by the Secretary of State. The plan is an improvement on the first EDP, published in 1999, and provides a sound strategic basis for school improvement and raising attainment. Effective mechanisms for consulting schools are now in place. Headteachers, governors and other stakeholders indicate that a genuine partnership exists between schools and the LEA and the priorities within the EDP are well understood and draw on, and reflect, those set out by schools in their school development plans.

35. The LEA's audit, set out in the EDP, clearly reflects local needs and is sufficiently detailed to identify the overall content of each priority such as the recruitment of teachers and development of e-learning. However, the plan recognises that, for some priorities, data are not sufficiently good to allow actions to be targeted precisely; in priority 4, for example improving the quality of data on underachieving groups is appropriately targeted for immediate attention. Activities build on the previous EDP although the evaluation of progress made on that plan is insufficiently rigorous. Where data are good, success criteria are specific and measurable. However, not all success criteria are sufficiently precise to make it easy to evaluate whether an activity has had the desired impact.

36. Targets within the EDP for English and mathematics at Key Stage 2 are very challenging. From 1999 to 2001 standards improved by 6.8 percent points. However, an increase of 10 percent points is necessary to reach the 2003 targets and a further increase of 8 percent points will be required to reach the 2004 targets. Plans are being put in place to provide additional support to schools, but progress will have to be considerable if the targets are to be met. Schools' aggregated targets for 2003 are 5 percent points below those of the LEA. Similarly, considerable improvement will be required if schools are to meet the Key Stage 3 targets in English and mathematics, and the targets for GCSE at the end of Key Stage 4 are challenging. Nevertheless, secondary schools' aggregated targets for 2003 are in line with those set by the LEA.

37. The school improvement programme is well structured. In general, activities are well linked to priorities and are purposeful with responsibilities, sequencing and resources for each activity being clear and appropriately targeted at specific groups of schools. There are examples of innovative approaches in, for example, the promotion of continuity and progression in pupils' learning.

38. A strength of the EDP is its coherence with other major plans such as Excellence in Cities (EiC), the Education Action Zone (EAZ) and the Early Years Development and Childcare Plan (EYDCP). Service and unit plans reflect appropriately activities within the EDP.

39. Social inclusion, support for ethnic minority pupils and the recruitment and retention of teachers are all appropriately covered. However, SEN is insufficiently covered in the audit of needs and is given insufficient attention overall.

40. Procedures for monitoring and evaluation are appropriately linked to the developing performance management arrangements within the LEA. Activities set out what will take place, to whom it will be reported, and in some cases the performance indicators that will be used. The LEA has adopted an effective way of reporting progress on the implementation of its plan to stakeholders and elected members. However, in order to improve monitoring and evaluation, senior officers recognise that actions need to be more precisely related to outcomes. Plans are in place to commission a higher education institution to evaluate the LEA's approach.

The allocation of resources to priorities

41. The LEA has successfully addressed the considerable weaknesses that were identified in the inspection of 2000. Overall, the LEA's performance is now satisfactory.

42. In 2001 the LEA undertook a fundamental review of the schools' funding formula, consulting fully with schools and other stakeholders and gaining the full commitment of elected members. The total SEN budget remains high in comparison with statistical neighbours, but improved planning has resulted in a significant reduction since 1999-00 and in better budgetary control.

43. The revised schools' funding formula introduced for 2001-02 is clear and transparent. Funding delegated for SEN is allocated according to agreed criteria which target resources to those schools most in need, and its use is monitored effectively by the LEA. The formula addresses a previous imbalance in the relative funding of primary and secondary schools by modifying age-weighted pupil units to favour primary schools.

44. Two-thirds of secondary schools and almost half of primary schools now rate the LEA's consultation about the planning and review of the education budget as good or better. The budget process begins early, and the council provides each service with three-year budget projections. The LEA, in turn, provides schools with timely indicative budgets and three-year projections.

45. Budgetary control is generally satisfactory. At LEA level, budgets are appropriately set within each service area, broadly reflecting the projected costs of service plans and priorities. However, service and unit plans contain too little detail of resource requirements to inform fully the budget planning process. The LEA is willing to propose and gain support for difficult decisions such as limiting early retirements for teachers in order to reduce costs in areas where spending is too high and which limit its capacity to fund schools.

46. Overall, spending within the education budget over the last two years reflects the commitment to give schools greater autonomy. In 2001-02, the proportion of LSB delegated to schools increased to 87 per cent compared with 82 per cent in the previous year. This rate of delegation exceeds government targets.

47. The LEA has been increasingly successful in attracting grant funding to supplement that provided by the council. There has been a significant shift from a culture of competitive bidding towards greater targeting at the LEA's inclusion agenda. Planning has improved, and 'exit strategies' ensure that the recipients of grants do not run into financial difficulties when funding stops. The LEA invites schools to bid for certain grants and provides appropriate guidance. Schools are improving gradually in their capacity to produce sound bids.

Structure for achieving continuous improvement including Best Value

48. The inspection of 2000 concluded that the LEA was not well placed to implement Best Value. Sound progress has been made and performance is now satisfactory. The LEA made good use of the last inspection report as a basis for

its improvement strategy. Use of evaluation by external auditors and others has guided and refined its planning. A coherent planning system is in place which links LEA planning to corporate planning. Objectives and targets in statutory plans for education, such as the EDP, action plans arising from inspection and Best Value reviews feed into operational plans at service and unit level.

49. The council has developed a promising system of performance management across all its services, with business support managers (BSM) attached to each service in order to lead the work. The BSM ensures that service and unit plans are monitored regularly and frequently. Progress in relation to planned actions is clearly highlighted using a 'traffic light' system that ensures that senior managers, the stakeholder forum and elected members are aware of actions in which progress needs to be improved. Senior officers within the LEA have regular dialogues with their line managers to discuss targets and performance; these meetings are well focused and, where necessary, lead to change. There remains scope for further focus on targets below third tier, but the large majority of staff takes part in annual appraisal meetings with their managers, with six-monthly review of performance.

50. The systems for monitoring performance are sound, but there remains some variability in the quality of service and unit planning. In particular, actions, objectives and timescales are not, in all cases, defined with sufficient precision to enable progress to be evaluated effectively.

Recommendation

In order to improve the quality of planning:

- the LEA should ensure that objectives and actions included in service and unit plans are defined with sufficient precision to enable progress to be monitored accurately, and that they are costed.

51. The external auditor judged the council's Best Value Performance Plan for 2001-02 to be adequate. Following the last inspection and a further review by external consultants, the LEA conducted Best Value reviews of its two major service areas, school improvement and access and inclusion. The reviews were broad in scope, but appropriate. The 2000 inspection report and the subsequent consultant's report provided a rigorous challenge and, to a large degree, set the objectives for the reviews. Reports by officers were scrutinised externally, which provided additional challenge. Consultation was sound and took account of the views of schools, parents and governors as well as LEA staff. Comparison within the reviews was a weakness and limited the LEA's ability to benchmark its services against others.

52. The improvement plans resulting from the reviews have been firmly embedded within service and unit plans and their implementation has resulted in

a significant reconfiguration of services, improved relationships with schools and other partners and in better performance management. These issues are further analysed in later sections of this report. Overall, schools now share the LEA's agenda for change.

SECTION 2: SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Summary of effectiveness of the LEA support for school improvement

53. The LEA's support for school improvement is satisfactory overall. Progress since the last inspection has been sound, and good in some areas. Raising standards in schools is fundamental to the council's strategy to regenerate and renew the borough. Services are now more coherent in their approach to school improvement and, overall, represent sound value for money. A key factor has been the development in the LEA's capacity to collect and analyse data and better target support. Strategies which promote school improvement have been in place a short time and impact is difficult to identify. The LEA is committed to helping schools become more autonomous self-evaluating institutions, and is actively working with partners to enable schools to have access to better services and more choice. However, standards remain well below national averages, although there are signs that the gap is closing slightly at Key Stages 2 and 4. Overall, improvements are being made to the weakest schools, but insufficient progress has been made in raising attainment in Key Stage 3, in improving attendance and in improving a small number of schools with endemic problems. The senior management team has the capacity to resolve these issues and plans are in place, drawn up in consultation with schools, which address these weaknesses.

Monitoring, challenge, and intervention

54. The inspection of 2000 judged the LEA's strategy for monitoring, challenge and intervention to be unsatisfactory overall. School improvement was not satisfactorily co-ordinated and the needs of schools had not been adequately analysed. The use and interpretation of data were insufficiently well developed and used to challenge schools. Since then there has been a significant improvement and this function is now performed satisfactorily.

55. The LEA has made a strong commitment to school autonomy and its actions support the principles of the Code of Practice on LEA-School Relations. While the LEA's approach is welcomed and understood by the majority of schools, protocols are insufficiently clearly set out in documentation and a number of schools are still unclear about the LEA's definition of monitoring, challenge and intervention and how the various strands fit together.

Recommendation

In order to ensure that all schools are clear about the LEA's approach to monitoring, challenge and intervention:

- publish and communicate a protocol, which sets out clearly the LEA's intentions and expectations.

56. A school profile was introduced during the autumn term of 2000 and has been further revised in conjunction with schools. The profile records provision and performance against agreed criteria and forms the basis of decisions about support and intervention. It forms a major part of the agenda for the autumn term visit by link advisers and is discussed by governing bodies during the spring term. Headteachers believe this is an effective document that helps in the process of challenge and has increased the LEA's knowledge of its schools. The profile is used as a valuable means of identifying effective practice in individual schools and across the borough. However, it is not linked sufficiently with schools' own self-review processes.

57. The inspection of 1998 indicated difficulties in the LEA's capacity to address the needs of all schools, and insufficient progress had been made when inspectors returned in 2000. Since then, satisfactory progress has been made. On the basis of the school profile, schools are allocated to one of three categories. Support is differentiated according to category, although all schools receive an entitlement of three visits a year. While this was acceptable following the inspection in 2000, when the LEA did not know its schools well, the LEA no longer needs this level of visiting for its most effective schools. School performance is reviewed regularly and, as a result of intervention, fewer schools are being identified that cause serious concern. Schools are generally aware of the system for categorisation and support but not all know their category, nor do they understand sufficiently the criteria that will move them from one category to another. Currently, 70 per cent of schools are in category A. This is a large number of schools which ranges in quality from satisfactory to good and the criteria are insufficiently differentiated to help these schools to judge what they need to do to improve.

Recommendation

In order to improve the targeting of support for schools:

- develop criteria, which differentiate between the range of schools in category A and the support they receive.

The effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring and challenging schools

58. Between 1998 and 2000 the LEA made significant progress with the collection and provision of data. This progress has been maintained and there has been a marked improvement in the way data are used by the LEA and in the guidance and training given to schools to interpret it and use them for target setting. Schools receive a comprehensive range of useful data, including local benchmarking, to supplement national performance information. Value added measures are being extended and now include ethnic minority groups in Key Stage 2. Data are used effectively to target specific groups and stages of

learning. Plans are in place to share data across the four authorities engaged in the Black Country school improvement partnership and this will make benchmarking information more effective, particularly at secondary level. Satisfactory progress is being made with the electronic transmission of data between schools and between schools and the LEA.

59. Until recently there has been insufficient challenge to schools in target setting. However, a number of actions have been put in place, which have led to improvement, particularly in the primary sector. The progress of individual pupils is tracked in primary schools and a new team of primary link advisers, all with recent experience of headship, is well trained in the challenge role. This ensures that discussion with schools on setting targets and putting action in place to meet them is more focused. The LEA is currently reviewing its arrangements at secondary level where challenge is much more variable. The school survey and discussion with headteachers indicate that challenge from the LEA has improved significantly, and that practices in some schools are being changed as a result.

Recommendation

In order to improve monitoring and challenging schools:

- introduce and agree with secondary schools more robust arrangements for challenge.

The effectiveness of the LEA's work with under-performing schools

60. The inspection of 2000 indicated that the LEA's support in identifying and intervening in under-performing schools was sound and had improved since 1998. Although progress has continued and support remains sound, the LEA recognises that some weaknesses remain.

61. In 1999 Sandwell had eight primary and two secondary schools requiring special measures and six primary and two secondary schools with serious weaknesses. Progress has been made and currently six schools require special measures (one secondary and five primary schools), two primary schools have serious weaknesses and one primary school has been designated under-performing. Two of these primary schools have been identified since April 2001. The LEA is now taking appropriate action at an earlier stage to support those schools it has identified for intervention. However, numbers remain too high and two primary schools requiring special measures and one with serious weaknesses have been in these categories for over two years. There is, nonetheless, an improvement on previous years.

62. The LEA's own monitoring has identified a further five schools as causing concern and 26 schools which require some support. Nevertheless, there are

signs of improvement. Since last year, there has been a decrease in the proportion of schools identified in category 'C' of nearly 30 per cent.

63. The LEAs approach to intervention in schools identified as causing concern has improved over the last year. Intervention takes account of the school's capacity to plan and implement remedial action and the school's link adviser monitors progress. Where progress is insufficient in category 'C' schools, a multi-disciplinary task group is formed made up of officers from different LEA services, the school's link adviser, headteacher and a governor. Task groups are tailored to the needs of the school. A plan of action is put in place and resources are allocated on a sliding scale, depending on the severity of the problems faced by the school. Action planning, which had inconsistencies, is now sound, and the support provided by task groups to schools is generally good. The link adviser monitors the school's progress against the action plan. Monitoring reports are generally rigorous and set clear agendas for improvement. Senior managers in the LEA regularly receive progress reports and action is given the highest priority and is now incisive. The LEA has clear strategies to deal with schools as they exit category C. Task groups are disbanded when their work is complete.

64. The LEA has made full use of its powers of intervention. Nevertheless, there remains a small number of schools where standards are not improving quickly enough. The LEA recognises this and is developing proposals through EiC to second headteachers and skilled teachers to work alongside existing staff. All schools will have a partner school, beacon schools will be used as an additional resource and the approach will be externally monitored. These proposals will increase the capacity of the LEA and have the potential to lead to improvement.

Support for literacy

65. Support for literacy was judged to be satisfactory at the last inspection and it remains so. A loss of strategic direction during the second half of 2001 due to the strategy manager's post being vacant has been resolved. A new manager for literacy and language was appointed in January 2002 and has made an effective start to providing clear leadership and direction. A team of three primary consultants ably supports the strategy manager.

66. Performance against targets in the EDP has been effectively monitored and slippage that occurred during the latter half of 2001 has largely been made good. EDP 2 sets out a coherent strategy for taking forward the implementation of the national strategy and is underpinned by a sound action plan.

67. The literacy team provides satisfactory support. Literacy consultants provide good quality training and support is being increasingly directed at improving the capacity of middle management in schools. Thirty per cent of

schools have been identified as requiring intensive support and a further 15 per cent as needing additional support. Support is appropriately differentiated and clearly set out in contracts. Since 1999, schools that have received intensive support show greater rates of improvement than the LEA average.

68. The manager for literacy and language is aware that progress in the development and deployment of leading literacy teachers has been too slow, and that this is impeding the overall effectiveness of support for literacy. However the literacy team has good protocols established for working with link advisers and a number of joint reviews are being planned. There is good communication with other initiatives within the LEA, with support for ethnic minority pupils and with the education action zone.

Recommendation

In order to increase the effectiveness of support for literacy:

- recruit and deploy leading literacy teachers to work alongside colleagues in schools.

Support for numeracy

69. The last inspection noted encouraging progress in primary schools and an effective start to the implementation of the National Numeracy Strategy, but raised serious concerns over the declining standards in approximately half of secondary schools. This led to a recommendation that is addressed later in this report (Para. 80). The LEA has made satisfactory progress since the last inspection. Momentum has increased since a new strategy manager was appointed last June and its full complement of consultants became operational. Support for numeracy is highly satisfactory.

70. The strategy manager provides strong leadership. There is now greater consistency of support from the four consultants. Teachers value their ability to tackle practical issues in the classroom in a sustained way. The numeracy team has established close links with other school improvement units in order to ensure a coherent approach in targeting specific groups of pupils and the strategy is closely aligned to the Key Stage 3 Strategy. The transfer and use of data are improving, but liaison between primary and secondary schools is variable. There are improving links with the Foundation Stage and with other initiatives operating within the LEA, such as, the Smethwick learning network and the EAZ. These are valuable in piloting new ideas and in spreading good practice. A programme of good quality training takes account of local needs. Schools not receiving intensive support also have access to consultancy and highly valued websites.

71. The quality of available data and the effectiveness of link advisers and consultants are enabling schools to use data productively. The numeracy team has developed a software package that enables schools to establish curriculum targets and to identify precisely which individuals and groups of pupils need additional support or challenge. Consultants have targeted support on those schools where assessment and target setting have been identified as weaknesses. The introduction of contracts between the numeracy team and schools has done much to define responsibilities, particularly to the role of senior managers in schools

Support for information and communication technology (ICT)

72. This function has not been inspected previously. Support to schools for ICT in the curriculum is satisfactory.

73. In Section 10 inspections conducted since 1999 fewer than half of primary schools attained standards in line with expectations at Key Stages 1 and 2. At Key Stage 3, the proportion of pupils who attained Level 5 in teacher assessments was below the national average. At Key Stage 4, the proportion attaining a nationally accredited award in ICT in 2001 was above the national average. Issues of non-compliance with National Curriculum requirements are reducing slowly.

74. There is a clear vision and leadership across the authority, with strong commitment from the chief executive and elected members, to implement an ambitious, coherent and imaginative strategy in partnership with Sandwell learning plus and the recently approved city learning centres. The strategy is new. It has been communicated to schools and representative headteachers have been actively involved in its formulation. However, it is not yet fully embedded in all schools' understanding.

75. The omission of ICT as a priority in the first EDP left the LEA with reduced capacity to intervene in all schools where ICT was a weakness. This has been rectified in EDP2 where e-learning figures prominently as a local priority. The plans give good attention to raising standards across the curriculum through the effective use of ICT. The need to raise standards in ICT at Key Stages 3 and 4 is addressed by other priorities, where there are specific and challenging targets.

76. The LEA has exceeded National Grid for Learning computer: pupil ratios for 2002 and is close to meeting those set for 2004. It is also set to exceed Broadband targets for 2002 and plans to have all schools connected by the end of 2003. About half of all teachers have completed their NOF training, a greater proportion than nationally.

77. Now that the strategy is shifting its focus to teaching and learning, many schools do not consider the advisory team to have sufficient recent and relevant experience to provide the right levels of challenge and support. Schools believe that the LEA has done too little to acknowledge and spread existing good

practice. Valuable initiatives within the Smethwick learning network and the EAZ have piloted new ways of learning with measurable success. Overall however, there are too few opportunities for ICT teachers to meet and share good practice. Where meetings have taken place they have been valued.

Recommendations

In order to improve support for ICT across the curriculum:

- make better use of leading practitioners in schools to share good practice; and
- ensure that advisory teachers have suitable training which enhances their expertise and experience to challenge and support the use of ICT in teaching and learning.

78. There are clear signs that the LEA is beginning to address these weaknesses. An e-learning adviser is to be appointed shortly to steer curriculum developments. The improved quality of data and the updated school profile enable the LEA to monitor standards and provision regularly, although the accuracy of teacher assessment remains an issue. A recent highly rated three-day course on assessment and moderation has begun to tackle the needs of schools to discuss cross-phase professional issues in depth. A wide range of alternative providers is available to schools through Black Country school improvement partnership. Although the structure of the e-learning unit is still evolving to meet the needs of the new strategy, the LEA's capacity for further improvement is satisfactory.

Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3

79. Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3 is satisfactory. This function was not inspected previously, but standards in mathematics in half of the authority's secondary schools were reported to be a serious concern and subject to a recommendation. Through EiC initiatives and the LEA's comprehensive review of all mathematics departments, progress is beginning to be made in raising standards.

80. The LEA's strategy has many strengths, but has yet to make an impact. Standards have not been rising quickly enough and, since 1997, the LEA has not been successful in closing the gap, particularly when compared with statistical neighbours. In 2001, the LEA demonstrated a positive improvement in English and indications are that this will extend to all subjects in 2002. The targets set by the EiC partnership are very challenging for 2003.

81. The strategy is comprehensive and clearly articulated. It is managed by a strong team under the capable leadership of the principal adviser (school development partnership) for school improvement. The LEA has developed an

imaginative and rigorous approach to improving transition from Key Stage 2 to 3 in EDP 2. Implementation of the strategy had a slow start but is now moving at a fast pace with the appointment of experienced and highly credible key staff. The appointment of two more consultants and a curriculum manager is imminent. Training has been well received and consultants have made a significant impact on classroom practice, but it is too early to judge effectiveness in raising standards.

82. The Key Stage 3 team works closely with link advisers. The improved quality and use of data have enabled the LEA and schools to identify strengths and weaknesses more accurately and to tackle the underachievement of specific groups. Effective strategies to share good practice by identifying Beacon departments and using them to support weak departments are in place, and strengths are shared at network meetings. Learning mentors are deployed to work constructively with underachieving pupils. Summer schools have been effective in enabling pupils who attain Level 3 in Year 6 to keep up with their peers on transfer and learning support centres have contributed to the drop in exclusion rates, but failed to improve overall rates of attendance.

Support for ethnic minority groups including Travellers

83. Support for ethnic minority groups and Travellers was not inspected in previous reports. The inspection of 2000 was critical of strategic management, there were errors in funding arrangements to support schools, and the 1998 recommendation had not been adequately addressed. Significant progress has been made since that time and support to schools is now satisfactory.

84. Ethnic minority pupils in Sandwell come from a wide range of groups and include nearly 200 pupils who are refugees or asylum seekers. By far the largest group are pupils from Indian heritage (14 per cent) with pupils from Pakistani heritage the next largest group (4.8 per cent).

85. The LEA has conducted a robust evaluation of the support it provides to ethnic minority and Traveller children. This has led to the establishment of suitable priorities that are rightly located within school improvement and service plans. The Sandwell ethnic minority achievement project (SEMAP) team was established in 2000 and is appropriately located in school improvement. The focus for development is clear although schools are uncertain about the strategy and links between the SEMAP and school improvement as a whole.

Recommendation

In order to ensure that all schools understand the strategy for support for ethnic minority and traveller children:

- clarify the strategy and ensure that the respective roles and responsibilities of the SEMAP team and link advisers are made clear.

86. The LEA delegates 85 per cent of the ethnic minority, Traveller and achievement grant (EMTAG) to schools through an agreed formula which appropriately targets funding at underachievement and low attainment amongst ethnic minority groups. Schools are expected to prepare an action plan, which targets precisely the use of the resource allocation. The SEMAP team is effectively deployed to local and national priorities such as early years and the Key Stage 3 strategy. In addition, a small rapid response team supports schools where asylum seekers, newly arrived ethnic minority children or Travellers are admitted. The SEMAP team and school link advisers provide support for action planning, monitor progress, evaluate pupil outcomes and provide a good range of well-regarded training opportunities for teachers and support staff.

87. The LEA's comprehensive data on ethnic minority groups includes attendance, exclusions, mobility and detailed analyses of the attainment of pupils by school and across the LEA as a whole. Attainment targets are in place for different groups along with an appropriate range of activities designed to bring about improvement. However, these are very recent developments and the impact is impossible to detect at this stage.

88. The LEA is part of the West Midlands consortium of LEAs that provides support for Traveller children and the schools they attend. This is a well-regarded service which supports individual children and their families, provides a peripatetic teaching service and operates a transfer system for traveller pupil records. Consortium membership represents good value for money.

Support for gifted and talented pupils

89. Support for gifted and talented pupils is highly satisfactory and is improving. The proportion of pupils in Sandwell schools attaining higher levels in national tests at all key stages is well below the national average and generally below statistical neighbours. The LEA's strategy focuses sharply on raising expectations of staff and pupils through strong partnerships between schools and between phases of education. The strategy is comprehensive, inclusive and coherent, ensuring that the EiC strand development is firmly embedded in EDP2, and is linked to the EAZs. The EiC co-ordinator for gifted and talented pupils has recently been appointed as a LEA adviser in order to ensure that the work of the

EiC and the school improvement service is seamless and to extend the work progressively into all primary schools.

90. It is too early to judge the impact on standards. However, there are clear indications that the work of the EiC partnership and the LEA has raised teachers' expectations and is enabling schools to learn from each other. The work of the adviser, regular meetings for co-ordinators in schools and interaction between related initiatives are all beginning to have an impact. The EN-able website is informative and is well used by schools, parents and governors. The establishment of local networks has led to the dissemination of good practice in monitoring, training, curriculum organisation and development. There is a good range of activities to challenge able pupils and to enrich learning experiences in all phases; these include imaginatively planned summer schools, advanced learning centres and the use of educational advocates. There is documented evidence of increased pupil motivation and of high levels of performance as a direct result. The network groups encourage and finance innovations. Plans are in place to extend the involvement of the primary phase in September.

The effectiveness of services to support school management

91. The 2000 inspection recommended that the LEA should improve schools' ability to make informed choices about a range of service providers. Since that time, significant progress has been made in extending options in the provision of services to schools. Following a fundamental review of school funding in 2001-02, and in full consultation with a stakeholder group representing headteachers, governors and trades unions, the LEA has compiled a list of alternative providers of services. It has accredited all companies on the list following rigorous quality assurance procedures. The LEA has also recently established a client services unit (CSU) to support schools in becoming more effective purchasers of services. The CSU has an appropriate degree of independence from the LEA's two other service areas, both of which are providers of traded services to schools. The CSU organised a 'trade fair' at which council and other accredited service providers informed schools about the services they offer. Further details are informatively presented in a manual of delegated services, though information about non-council providers is limited. CSU staff have begun to train governors in improving their procurement skills, and new headteachers also receive training in this area. Schools are not yet fully aware of the role of the CSU and how best to use its services, and despite discontent with some council services, the majority of schools continue to buy them back.

92. Most council services are now offered under annual service level agreements (SLA). Increasingly, the services offer a flexible range of options to schools, including a 'pay-as-you-go' alternative. Service standards are set out clearly. Costs are realistic and, for the most part, transparent. A minority of services is still provided under long-term contracts negotiated under compulsory

competitive tendering (CCT). Regular and frequent meetings between the CSU manager, council and external providers are potentially valuable in spreading good practice and in improving services to schools.

Recommendation

In order to improve the support provided to school management:

- ensure that the role of the CSU is promoted effectively in schools to improve their effectiveness and efficiency as purchasers of services.

Human resources

93. This aspect of the LEA's work was judged to be satisfactory during the last inspection and remains sound. Internal re-structuring has provided schools with improved access to small teams of staff, each equipped to provide the full range of personnel support. Though schools are offered a range of service options, the vast majority has opted to buy the entire package offered by the unit. A satisfactory range of model policies is available to schools and appropriate training in personnel matters is provided to headteachers and governors. Casework is well supported and industrial relations are generally good. There have been no recent industrial tribunals.

94. There are weaknesses in the links between the personnel and payroll systems. A corporate management information system is planned, which has the potential to rectify this situation.

95. The unit provides effective strategic advice to LEA senior managers in support of their efforts to reduce the burden of pre-retirement costs on schools. The service also contributes effectively to the identification of and support for schools causing concern.

Financial services

96. The inspection of 2000 recommended the LEA to take action to bring school budgets back into balance and ensure that all schools in deficit have recovery plans that are realistic, monitored and achievable. The proportion of schools with deficit budgets or with substantial surpluses remains unsatisfactory. However, the LEA has succeeded in making considerable improvements. About a quarter of schools began the 2000-01 year with deficit budgets. By the end of that year, the number of schools in deficit had fallen slightly, but almost a half of primary schools had surpluses exceeding 5 percent of their budgets. In partnership with schools, the LEA has made good progress in reducing the number of schools with deficit budgets to a projected level of about 15 per cent at the beginning of 2002-03. The LEA monitors all budgets each term and work is

in hand to improve schools' ability to manage resources. The LEA's provision overall is satisfactory.

Property services

97. Property services are satisfactory overall. Schools have access to an appropriately differentiated package of services. The pooling of delegated resources for both landlord and tenant functions provides schools with the security that major repairs will be dealt with promptly. Appropriately, a forum of headteachers plays a part in managing this school repair account. Nevertheless, schools have too little control of the scheduling of less urgent works and, in consequence, of the value-for-money they receive from their annual investment.

98. Overall, schools rate building maintenance and the programming and management of building projects as barely satisfactory and at a lower level than previously. Despite this, the vast majority of schools continue to purchase all aspects.

Recommendation

In order to improve the quality of property services:

- put in place arrangements for property services which improve quality control mechanisms.

Services for ICT in school administration

99. Progress in this area has been satisfactory. Overall, the LEA provides a highly satisfactory level of service. There are well-developed strategic plans to introduce broadband connections in all schools and to introduce an authority-wide management information system.

100. There have been significant improvements in the exchange of electronic information between schools and between the LEA and schools. The LEA has a well-used intranet site on which it posts significant information and policy documents. The LEA's information management strategy recognises that there remain some shortcomings; for example, there is some duplication in terms of the information that is requested from schools and there are instances of significant delay in the provision of technical support for schools whose ICT systems are malfunctioning. The quality of support for schools' administrative software is good.

Cleaning and caretaking

101. Overall, performance is highly satisfactory. The LEA provides a flexible package of services to schools, including assistance with recruitment and training

for those schools wishing to employ their own cleaning and caretaking staff. The service also provides technical advice and an annual cleaning inspection. Schools rate the service better than satisfactory.

Grounds maintenance

102. Performance is unsatisfactory. Half of secondary schools and over a third of primary schools rate the service as poor. Schools' ratings have deteriorated significantly since the last inspection. The service is delivered by the council's direct service organisation (DSO) under CCT contracts negotiated some time ago. Grounds maintenance in schools represents about 5 per cent of the DSO's business, and schools have complained that, too often, their playing fields and green spaces are not maintained according to agreed schedules. There have been few improvements despite a Best Value review of the council's entire parks and greenspace service in 2000-01. Service managers are aware of the need for more flexible arrangements when current contracts expire and are already consulting about the form of future SLA.

Recommendation

In order to improve the quality of grounds maintenance:

- ensure the renegotiation of grounds maintenance contracts take full account of the principles of Best Value.

Catering

103. Performance is unsatisfactory. Almost half of schools rate the LEA's support below satisfactory. Portion sizes and menus are frequent sources of complaint and the take-up of both free and bought meals in Sandwell schools is low. The LEA monitors the service effectively but has been unable to resolve current difficulties. There are promising signs of greater flexibility and an improved service when the current CCT contract expires in the near future. There has been thorough consultation with schools and the health authority on the future contract. Tender specifications are detailed and bids have been scrutinised rigorously. Appropriately, the authority's contract support service also offers a tailor-made service to support schools choosing to employ their own catering staff or negotiating separate contracts.

Support to governors

104. Previous inspections judged support to governing bodies to be satisfactory and it remains so, with some strengths. Although no detailed fieldwork was undertaken in this area during this inspection, the LEA can point to continuing good progress. The association of Sandwell governors works closely with the LEA and governors are well represented on key stakeholder groups. Following

the Best Value review the structure of support for governors was amended. Governance is now firmly part of the school improvement service and is led by third tier officer. Recruitment has resulted in a reduction of LEA governor vacancies and an increase in ethnic minority representation on governing bodies. A new self-evaluation tool for governors is currently being piloted.

Support for school management

105. Support for school leadership and management was unsatisfactory at the time of the last inspection. There were a number of positive features but no coherent strategy was in place. In particular the LEA was recommended to improve its guidance to secondary schools on self-evaluation; ensure access to a wider range of providers; establish better support to senior managers in secondary schools and develop mechanisms for sharing good practice. Progress in these areas has been good and support is now highly satisfactory. A clear framework for supporting leadership and management is now in place. Some developments have only been instigated recently and therefore impact is limited, especially in secondary schools. Schools rated support for middle managers as less than satisfactory, but the LEA now has in place a strong programme, in association with the National College for School Leadership and the University of Warwick, for meeting this demand, initially in secondary schools.

106. The strategy for developing leadership and management in schools is properly based on supporting schools as they progress towards greater autonomy. The new 'framework for leadership and management' is supported by the appointment of a headteacher consultant. Some schools have benefited from additional support such as the secondment of experienced headteachers. A revised model of self-review has been agreed with schools and this is underpinned with good quality performance and benchmark data. Good progress is being made on using Beacon school networks to develop good practice and schools are benefiting from this. Good practice is shared with a successful LEA in another region. Sandwell is a major contributor to the development of the Black Country school improvement partnership, which is beginning to offer innovative ways of supporting leadership and management, including a quality assured brokerage system for consultancy. Participation in national leadership programmes has been poor but there is a welcome increase in interest and support this year.

107. OFSTED inspection grades for leadership and management in Sandwell schools have been below both statistical neighbour and national norms. However, improvement over the past year has been above the national trend. The strategies now in place and the provision being developed in partnership with quality providers mean that the LEA's capacity for further improvement is good.

The LEA's work in assuring the supply and quality of teachers

108. This function was not inspected in 2000. The LEA's work in this area is highly satisfactory although the impact of provision is only just beginning. Action to recruit and retain teachers, and to provide better opportunities for accessing quality programmes of professional development has moved forward considerably in the past 12 months. However, the task facing the LEA is considerable. Regular staffing surveys indicate that the percentage of unfilled vacancies across all phases is above both statistical neighbours and the national average. Particular difficulties occur in recruiting teachers of shortage subjects in secondary schools, and to schools in challenging circumstances, serious weaknesses and special measures. Schools find it difficult to recruit quality supply teachers. Over 40 per cent of newly qualified teachers leave within four years of appointment. Nearly 50 per cent of staff providing leadership in schools are aged 50 or over.

109. The LEA is meeting these challenges rigorously and its work is beginning to have an impact. Recruitment and retention was a key area for action in the third year of EDP 1, and is a key element in EDP 2. As a leading partner in the Black Country school improvement partnership, the LEA has established a close relationship with the consortium's recruitment strategy manager and is planning it's own appointment in the near future.

110. Primary headteachers have welcomed the establishment of a primary pool for the recruitment of newly qualified teachers. Teachers have also been appointed from Jamaica. A range of retention incentives is available including an innovative teaching professional guarantee. The recruitment and quality control of supply staff are being reviewed. The LEA recognises that it under-recruits from its minority ethnic community and has set up a single regeneration budget (SRB) funded project in Smethwick to address this. Although many of these initiatives are still at an early stage, there is evidence that vacancies are being filled more quickly than a year ago.

111. The strategy for continuous professional development (CPD) has developed significantly over the past two years, involving consultation with headteachers and a detailed audit of need. The Black Country school improvement partnership supplements the LEA's own provision with an increasing range of providers and is developing an on-line brokerage scheme for schools. Beacon schools are involved effectively with CPD across the borough. However, the authorities ability to recruit and deploy of advanced skills teachers is a weakness. The programme for inducting new headteachers provides a valuable introduction to the LEA and is well regarded by heads. A peer-mentoring scheme for new deputy headteachers is to be introduced shortly. The induction programme for newly qualified teachers is sound. Where there have been breakdowns in mentoring arrangements in schools, the LEA has quickly

stepped in to improve matters. An 'excellence in Sandwell' scheme has been instituted to share and celebrate good practice. The LEA's capacity to improve the quality and recruitment of teachers is good.

The effectiveness of services to support school improvement

112. At the time of the last inspection in 2000, the leadership and expertise of the former advisory service were judged to be satisfactory. However planning and performance management were unsatisfactory. The education strategy group, established after the 1998 inspection, was ineffective and services were poorly co-ordinated.

113. Progress in all these areas since 2000 has been satisfactory and in some instances good. Service planning and performance management are now sound. Service and unit plans are consistently linked together, and to the EDP. Individual performance targets are set for advisers and are reviewed monthly. Overall, there is a strong sense of strategic direction and this is leading to a visible impact on school improvement.

114. Additional advisers with recent management experience in schools have been recruited. This, and an enhanced programme of professional development for school improvement staff, has led to an improvement in the calibre and expertise of advisers that has been welcomed by schools. The LEA is aware of the difficulties in recruiting high quality advisers, especially with relevant secondary experience, and is responding creatively by using teacher consultants and secondments, part time appointments and buying in external consultancy. Nevertheless, some inconsistencies remain. The quality of notes recording visits to schools is variable, and in some cases poor, despite written procedures. Too often they contain too little evaluative comment and no indication of the action that will follow. Notes are not automatically shared with governors.

Recommendation

In order to improve the quality and consistency of visits to schools:

- notes of visit should be more incisive and should record the outcome of the visit. Headteachers should complete their section of the form and the completed note should be shared with governors. As soon as possible the LEA should move to an electronic system of recording visits.

115. Following the Best Value review the school improvement service was totally reformed into six units covering school performance, pupil achievement, curriculum enhancement, partnership development, governance support and e-learning. This structure is being refined to take account of the impact of the many new initiatives being adopted in Sandwell, such as EiC. The interim head

of school improvement leads these units effectively. Cross unit planning and joint working are now much stronger. However, there is still some variability across services in the consistency of their approach to schools. Operational systems for sharing information about schools are to be introduced and have the potential to improve consistency.

116. The rationale for the deployment of support to schools is now consistent with the Code of Practice, although there is insufficient differentiation in support for category A schools. The LEA has taken a lead in introducing EiC with its secondary schools. This has transformed the relationship schools have with each other, and with the LEA. A major new strand of the programme will be support for those schools where further intervention is required. Cluster groups have been re-aligned to a 'six town model' based on the traditional population centres of the borough. This has been generally welcomed by schools, and has the benefit of organising school support on the same basis as inclusion and health.

117. Sandwell is a comparatively low spender on school improvement. It has achieved significant progress and therefore offers sound value for money. However the LEA's ability to move a small number of unsuccessful schools forward is highly dependent on external funding. Progress will also depend on the successful appointment of a substantive Head of School Improvement. Given these caveats, the prospect of further sustained improvement within this service is highly satisfactory.

SECTION 3: SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Summary of effectiveness of LEAs Special Educational Needs provision (SEN)

118. The LEA's provision for special educational needs is satisfactory overall with strengths in some areas. A clear strategy for inclusion has been published following extensive consultation. Much of the suspicion and vagueness about the strategy and funding for SEN reported in earlier inspections has disappeared as a result of the publication of transparent criteria for allocating provision and funding to schools. The reorganisation of service units into area-based teams is providing more effective and efficient support. The LEA's targeting of resources to vulnerable children is more secure. However, much of this work is relatively new and its impact is not yet apparent in the progress made by pupils.

Strategy

119. The last inspection judged the LEA's strategy for inclusion to be unsatisfactory and recommended that the LEA should set out clearly its vision for future development and SEN provision in mainstream schools, including the role of enhanced learning provision (ELP). The LEA has successfully met this recommendation and a new inclusion strategy has been published following wide consultation. The capacity to implement this strategy effectively has been strengthened by restructuring the special educational needs services.

120. Strategic planning is now sound and sets out clearly Sandwell's commitment to inclusion. The LEA has been partially successful in meeting its stated aim to develop a better co-ordinated and more inclusive learning community through the three broad themes of strategic planning and partnership; resources, funding and delegation and quality provision, services and support. The LEA has recently created the special educational needs group to provide cross-service liaison and to monitor the development of the SEN strategy as it progresses. Overall, the strategy is complex in its presentation and it is not always clear how actions will lead to the achievement of objectives and performance indicators. There is more detail, however, in individual unit plans, which appropriately translate the strategy into operational detail.

121. The Best Value review of access and inclusion has given considerable impetus to the development and implementation of both the strategy and action plans. The monitoring of action plans is good and it is clear that considerable progress has been made in most respects. The delayed publication of the revised Code of Practice has caused slippage in some actions and this in turn, has delayed the revision to the LEA's policy for SEN.

122. Elected members have demonstrated their commitment to the SEN strategy and have taken difficult decisions to carry out the first phase of special

school reorganisation. Phase two aims to resolve provision for pupils with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties, and will require similar determination and resolve.

Statutory obligations

123. The 1998 inspection indicated that the LEA was not meeting the required timescale for producing statements. By 2000, progress had been made and systems were in place to improve this situation. Momentum has been maintained; the LEA is taking reasonable steps to meet its statutory obligations and provision is highly satisfactory.

124. The LEA's assessment and administration of statements has substantially improved following the restructuring of support into area teams. As a result the rate of improvement in securing statements has increased dramatically and in three of the last four quarters of the current year, 82 per cent have been issued within 18 weeks. The volume of statements has stabilised and that, along with closer financial monitoring, has ensured that the budget for statements has not been exceeded for the last two years.

125. Criteria for referrals are clear, straightforward and understood by schools. An investment by support services in pre-referral stages has been crucial and almost all pupils who are referred for a statement go through. Annual reviews are carried out and LEA officers attend when an adjustment is needed or where children transfer from primary to secondary schools. This allows educational psychologists' time to be used more profitably and helps to promote school autonomy. Arrangements for transition planning are in place. Monitoring arrangements ensure that the LEA is well informed about the progress of all pupils with statements.

126. Currently, 65 per cent of children with statements attend mainstream schools. This is an improvement of 20 percentage points on the 1998 figure. Similarly, 85 per cent of children diagnosed with high incidence special needs at the pre-school stage enter mainstream schools. The LEA's success in its partnership with parents is demonstrated by the very few appeals that need to be taken to tribunal. The LEA has decided to outsource this function to MENCAP. The potential benefits of this outsourcing should be to ensure a more objective and transparent relationship between officers, parents and carers.

School improvement

127. In 1998 SEN services were judged to be providing satisfactory support to schools. However, the absence of data was impeding schools' ability to evaluate the impact that support was having. In 2000 schools lacked knowledge and understanding of their entitlement to centrally-funded SEN services and funding arrangements. The LEA has made significant progress in meeting these

weaknesses, largely as a result of restructuring SEN services and implementing its strategic plan for inclusion. Support is now satisfactory. In school inspections, SEN provision and the attainment and progress made by pupils with SEN, are satisfactory or better in nine tenths of Sandwell schools.

128. The inclusion and SEN support services are aligned to each other to and the school improvement service and are linked to the neighbourhood model of local service delivery. Plans are clear and schools have a sound understanding of how to access services, and what resources they are entitled to. However, arrangements are relatively new and it is too early for the changes to have had an impact. Nevertheless, the LEA's annual survey of schools indicates a high level of satisfaction with the new arrangements.

129. The deployment of additional educational needs funding and the organisation of enhanced learning provision (ELP) are now more transparent and regarded by schools as fair. The LEA's commitment to the development of school autonomy is clear and schools are encouraged, through the school profile, to review the impact of their use of resources on the performance of under-achieving groups.

130. A good range of training opportunities has been provided for headteachers, SENCOs and governors. A partnership developed with Birmingham University and Dudley LEA is providing accredited training for SENCOs. Overall, participants rate training highly.

Value for money

131. At the time of the last inspection in 2000 the new funding formula was incomplete and the lack of systematic data meant that the LEA was unable to measure the efficiency of its overall provision.

132. Since that time, satisfactory progress has been made and following extensive consultation with schools the formula allocation for funding SEN has been revised and implemented. Delegation of funds to schools has increased and better data and closer monitoring of budgets has enabled the LEA to target the additional educational need element of the budget using open and transparent criteria. Information regarding the formula allocations is in the public domain and, as a consequence, much of the suspicion reported in earlier inspections has diminished.

133. Schools are clear how to access services and are aware of their entitlement. The involvement of link advisers in the annual monitoring of schools' provision is securing better intelligence about schools' use of SEN funding and on the progress of pupils.

134. Funding for SEN, at 17.5 per cent of the LSB, is high. However, overall spending has stabilised and resources are now targeted through well considered criteria where needs are greatest. As a result value for money is satisfactory.

SECTION 4: PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION

Summary of effectiveness in promoting social inclusion

135. The LEA's actions to promote social inclusion, while sound strategically, have some weaknesses operationally. The council has a strong commitment to social inclusion through its regeneration and renewal strategy, and to the place of education within it. The achievement of vulnerable groups is well recognised in planning for school improvement and for SEN. Recent corporate planning to bring service delivery to neighbourhoods has begun the process of bringing services together at a community level and focusing support on the most deprived areas. However, these are new initiatives which have yet to have an impact. Partnerships with other agencies supporting the most vulnerable pupils have improved and the LEA is a major contributor to many of the initiatives, which are operating currently within the authority at a community level. These initiatives are not yet brought together in a coherent way, but work is beginning to resolve this issue. There are strengths in provision for children in public care and aspects of measures to combat racism, where the council has made good progress. Social regeneration features strongly in school place planning and support to behaviour is sound. Where progress has been insufficient and provision is currently unsatisfactory, strategies are in place that have the potential to lead to improvement.

The supply of school places

136. This aspect of the LEA's work was judged to be satisfactory with strengths outweighing weaknesses in the last inspection of 2000 and it remains so. Good progress has been made in reducing overall levels of surplus places. The LEA has taken sound decisions to close schools, based on considerations of quality as well as pupil numbers. Further proposals are well advanced. The recent re-organisation of special schools has significantly reduced the number of surplus places in the sector. The LEA has used its infant class size grant effectively to reduce all Key Stage 1 classes below 30 pupils.

137. However, the current School Organisation Plan for 2001-06 is unsatisfactory. It was published in January 2002, some four months later than required because of the re-structuring of the service area responsible for its production. The plan contains a satisfactory overview of provision in the borough, but is already out of date. Despite encouraging reductions in the overall levels of surplus capacity across the borough, approximately 10 per cent of primary schools and 25 per cent of secondary schools have more than a quarter of their capacity unfilled. This issue receives too little attention in the plan but is dealt with more appropriately in the draft School Organisation Plan for 2002-07. The accuracy of the LEA's forecasting of pupil numbers has improved but the rate of error remains too high at over 1 per cent in primary schools and close to 1 per cent in secondary schools. Data in electronic form are available

only for the last three years, and there are difficulties in the electronic transfer of data about birth rates between the health service and the LEA. The school organisation committee is appropriately constituted, works effectively and is well serviced by the LEA.

138. Improving the quality of educational provision in Sandwell forms a central plank in the council's regeneration strategy. Proposals to develop, in partnership with others, a city academy are consistent with this strategy. The LEA is aware of and prepared to manage the capacity issues involved. Through its proposed admission arrangements the academy will contribute to social inclusion across the borough. The LEA hopes that the development will reduce the proportion of the borough's Year 6 pupils who transfer to secondary schools outside Sandwell.

139. The recent appointment of a new manager to oversee the work of planning school places and the anticipated appointment of a data manager are likely to lead to improvements in planning and forecasting.

Admissions

140. The inspection of 1998 judged admissions to be satisfactory. This function has not been inspected in detail in this inspection. Nevertheless, since 1998, the LEA has put in place measures which have simplified admission procedures, introduced a pupil tracking system and carried out consultation with stakeholders and schools. Provision remains satisfactory.

Asset management

141. Despite some early setbacks, asset management planning is satisfactory and appropriate links are made with the School Organisation Plan, EDP and corporate objectives in setting out how capital works will be prioritised. The plan has now been judged satisfactory by DfES. The LEA has completed a condition survey of schools, and plans are in hand, albeit belatedly, to complete suitability and sufficiency surveys. The local policy statement, recently published, and the resulting capital project priority list for the next two years now form key parts of the LEA's Asset Management Plan. This, represents a step forward in achieving greater transparency about priorities for investment.

142. DfES data indicates that spending required in Sandwell to clear the condition backlog of urgent repairs over the next five years is only £24 per pupil, placing the LEA among the top quartile of all English LEAs. The large majority of schools choose to pay the revenue and capital funding delegated to them for property maintenance into the schools repair account, which acts as a form of property insurance and is supplemented by further grant funding and other sources of capital. During 2002-03, this funding amounts to over £20m, with a further £16m available for 2003-04. In the short term, therefore, the LEA has made provision for sufficient resources to be available to schools to meet the

condition backlog and to ensure further improvements in the quality of school buildings.

Provision of education for pupils who have no school place

143. The LEA was previously found to have made improvements in securing prompt and appropriate placement for pupils permanently excluded from schools, although it was unable to meet the demand fully, and was reliant on the success of its inclusion strategy to do so in the future.

144. In spite of the recent success of its strategies, which focus on preventative measures for permanent exclusions, the LEA's provision currently is unsatisfactory overall. A significant number of secondary aged pupils have access to no more than two hours of education each week because of a temporary, but significant, rise in 1999-2000 in the number of pupils permanently excluded from school. There are effective systems to monitor the number of exclusions and to ensure that pupils are assessed within the required time. However, elected members and senior officers have failed until very recently to pay sufficient attention to this unacceptably low level of part-time provision. The LEA has comprehensive, costed plans to ensure that all excluded pupils receive their entitlement to full time education by September 2002.

Recommendation

In order to ensure that all excluded pupils receive their entitlement to full time education for September 2002:

- implement the costed plan as soon as possible and ensure that elected members and senior officers rigorously monitor both the quantity and quality of provision.

145. The LEA's strategy to recover this situation is sound overall and ensures appropriate emphasis is given to eliminating permanent exclusions. Since the temporary rise, exclusions have reduced in line with the LEAs targets. The capacity to comply with statutory requirements for September 2002 is closely linked to the continued success of meeting targets within the strategy.

146. Following the Best Value review of access and inclusion, the pupil referral and exclusion service (PRES) was restructured and enlarged to provide a tighter focus on raising standards and to introduce unified systems for prevention, referrals, curriculum brokerage and reintegration. Schools have high regard for the work of PRES. The federation of four pupil referral units (PRU) caters separately for permanently excluded pupils at Key Stages 3 and 4, pupils out of school for medical reasons and schoolgirl mothers. In addition, there is a separate unit, attached to a primary school, for Key Stage 2 pupils and a teaching room at the local hospital. The provision in each of the units is designed well to meet specific needs, with a curriculum that is broad and

relevant. The LEA has implemented a thorough monitoring programme to raise standards and three of the four PRUs have recently received positive inspection reports. The proportion of pupils in the units attaining a qualification at 16 is higher than the national average and much higher than that of statistical neighbours. The unit for schoolgirl mothers has been particularly successful in securing sustained commitment from its pupils. It has received a school achievement award and is seeking Beacon status.

147. Re-integration rates have improved overall. Referral systems are clearly understood by schools and parents. The introduction of a pupil tracking system has greatly improved the LEA's knowledge of all pupils' whereabouts. Attendance is monitored regularly and poor attendance followed up. This has led to improved attendance of part-time pupils in the Key Stage 3 unit. There is an improved strategy for school phobics, which focuses on prevention and re-integration. The LEA has recognised that there are flaws in arrangements brokered with external providers for pupils at Key Stage 4. There is insufficient follow up with the college to check on pupils' progress and attendance. There is satisfactory provision for those pupils whose parents choose to educate them at home.

Recommendation

In order to improve the effectiveness of provision for Key Stage 4 pupils:

- work should be undertaken with schools to improve the arrangements for monitoring and evaluation of Key Stage 4 pupil placements with external providers.

Attendance

148. At the time of the last inspection, the LEA was judged to have made satisfactory progress in addressing the recommendations from the previous report. Since that time, and up to January 2002, the LEA's provision had regressed. Recent actions have the potential to lead to improvement, but support for attendance is unsatisfactory currently.

149. Sandwell has the lowest overall attendance rate in secondary schools across the West Midlands and remains well below the national average. In primary schools, attendance rates are also well below the national average and are no better than they were in 1998. The projected figures for 2002 indicate a further decline in overall attendance and an increase in unauthorised absence in secondary schools, with only 25 per cent of schools achieving 90 per cent attendance.

150. Until this year, the LEA had not taken a strategic approach to improving attendance. The work of the education welfare service (EWS) has been mainly reactive and its advice to schools has lacked clarity and consistency, leading to highly variable practice in recording and reporting. The LEA has not done enough to enable schools to recognise their own responsibilities in monitoring attendance accurately. Although the service has established a useful database to enable schools to analyse patterns of attendance, it has not been widely used and support has not been targeted at specific groups of pupils.

Recommendations

In order to improve the management of attendance within schools:

- ensure that schools record and report on attendance accurately and consistently; and
- provide guidance to schools so that they make full use of all available data.

151. Although the EWS can point to isolated examples where its work has made a difference, it has made no impact on attendance rates overall. However, its frequent truancy patrols in local 'hot spots' in collaboration with the police, have been successful in reducing unauthorised absence and raising awareness within the community. Overall, the management and deployment of education welfare officers has been ineffective. In the last year, there has been a high turnover of staff at all levels, long-term absences and the use of staff from supply agencies, all of which have led to high levels of dissatisfaction in a number of schools.

Recommendation

In order to ensure the effective and efficient deployment of staff:

- implement rigorous systems to evaluate the impact of the work of the EWS.

152. Since January, attendance has become a very high priority. A clear and comprehensive long-term strategy is being developed and excellent use has been made of external consultants. EDP2 presents a robust strategy for improving levels of attendance. It identifies vulnerable groups of pupils who are likely to underachieve because of poor attendance. These pupils will be set specific and ambitious targets for attendance and attainment. A more relevant curriculum is planned to motivate pupils.

153. The EWS is being radically restructured and an experienced strategy manager has recently been appointed. The executive director has recently set targets for schools that match national targets. More rigorous monitoring procedures have been introduced with regular reports to scrutiny committee on long-term absences. These developments have the potential for significant improvement in the future.

Behaviour support

154. Support for improving pupils' behaviour was generally satisfactory at the time of the 2000 inspection and remains so. This function has not been the subject of detailed analysis in this inspection. However, the LEA is able to point to progress in this area. This has been achieved through re-structuring the pupil referral and exclusion service, the publication of guidance on managing exclusions, increased rates of re-integration and managed moves between schools. The LEA through the Excellence in Cities initiative and other associated strategies has recently introduced learning support centres in 11 secondary schools. The number of permanent exclusions dropped in 2001 by 19 per cent but was far short of the target. However, since September, this positive trend has accelerated and the LEA is set to meet the 2002 target. The Behaviour Support Plan is satisfactory. Its weakness has been addressed by recent developments, which map out in necessary detail how the LEA plans to reduce disaffection and disengagement.

Health, safety, welfare and child protection

155. Health, safety and welfare has not been subject to inspection previously. There is a clearly defined policy for health and safety and provision is satisfactory overall. Procedures are in place for monitoring and dealing with areas of risk in educational settings through audit arrangements. These are systematically organised for high-risk areas such as design and technology and science. Elsewhere they are carried out on request or as needs arise. Appropriate training and guidance is provided to headteachers, governors and others, some of which leads to accreditation. Accidents which occur in schools are entered on a database and appropriately followed up. There are bi-monthly checks on all educational buildings other than schools, with feedback to the corporate team. The corporate team undertakes training on health and safety for managers. Overall, schools rate the support provided by the LEA better than satisfactory.

156. The LEA's provision for child protection, which has not been inspected before, has some satisfactory features but there are a number of weaknesses in provision and it is unsatisfactory overall. Information gathering is poor. Schools do not automatically inform the LEA when a referral takes place. This means that the LEA is unable to identify types of problem or analyse emerging patterns. In addition, where education welfare officers attend case meetings, notes are not

uniformly passed back to the centre. There are some groups of pupils who are potentially vulnerable, and for whom the LEA is unable to ensure that problems are picked up. Some, such as Key Stage 4 pupils on courses at the local college of further education, have been identified. However, pupils educated at home and excluded pupils are inadequately covered.

157. In the small number of inspections conducted by OFSTED of Sandwell schools during 2000, child protection was judged to be good overall and never less than satisfactory. LEA guidelines written in 1998 are to be revised to take account of new procedures. An inter-agency protocol has been written which should clarify the responsibilities of various agencies under the new framework for assessment. Training has taken place for agency staff and begins for schools this term. Additional visits will be made by social services and education staff to cluster groups to explain the protocol more fully. All schools have a designated officer for child protection and all have received training. Additional training is offered on request although it has been constrained because only one LEA officer is a qualified trainer. Service standards are in place, concerns are quickly responded to and schools rate the LEA's support better than satisfactory, although liaison between education and social services is rated poorly.

Recommendations

In order to improve child protection ensure that:

- systems are put in place where all referrals are reported to the LEA and recorded; and
- mechanisms are put in place which ensure that all children can be accounted for.

Children in public care

158. The 1998 report made no judgement about the quality of support for children in public care. Since that time, attainment has improved, challenging targets set for 2002 and beyond are likely to be met and support for these children is good.

159. There are currently 450 children in the care of the local authority. Thirty of these children are educated in other local authorities. The council published a clear and succinct corporate parenting statement in 1999-2000. Responsibilities of the education, health and social inclusion services are clearly set out and partnership arrangements are strong. EDP 2 sets out appropriate actions for these children aimed at narrowing the attainment gap and tackling underachievement; targets are challenging. The looked after children in education (LACE) team is effectively led. Elected members take their corporate responsibilities seriously and receive reports twice yearly.

160. The LEA collects good data each term for children in public care. In addition, social workers keep databases regularly updated. Almost all children in public care have a personal education plan (PEP), and foster carers, schools, designated social workers and the LACE team hold copies. This allows support to be well targeted to the needs of individuals. A small number of pupils do not have a PEP if they are in short term care for less than four weeks or receiving respite care. The LACE team has identified this as one of its service priorities.

161. All schools have a designated teacher and the LACE team effectively leads training designed to raise awareness of roles and responsibilities, implement guidance and improve the use of PEPs to raise attainment. A range of community projects and initiatives complement the overall provision.

162. The LEA target for all children in public care to have achieved a GCSE/GNVQ equivalent qualification at age 16 by 2002 is challenging. It was met in 2001 and represents a significant improvement on the previous year's results. There has been a reduction in rates of offending and exclusion amongst this group of pupils and their attendance overall has improved.

Measures to combat racism

163. The LEA's work on combating racism has not been inspected previously. Since autumn 2000 the LEA has embarked on a range of activities to minimise racist incidents and to promote the importance of race equality issues. The LEA's provision in this area is highly satisfactory.

164. The findings of the select committee, set up by the council to address the implications of the McPherson report, were extensive and resulted in a comprehensive action plan, which is currently being implemented. Progress towards stated equality targets is being made.

165. A race equality task group has been established to determine LEA policy, oversee the McPherson action plan and to monitor schools. Links with the headteacher advisory forum are established and useful community consultation has taken place. The task group is represented on the council's race and community group, which is responsible for strategic development and is held to account by the equality scrutiny committee. Liaison between education, health and local communities has been established via the Sandwell ethnic minority umbrella forum in order to secure better communication between the council and local communities across the six towns of the borough.

166. Training programmes including the Commission for Racial Equality's "learning for all" are actively promoted and the local standing advisory council for religious education (SACRE) is developing curriculum materials in this area. Council policies, including racial harassment, have been circulated to all schools and guidance produced to assist them in determining their own policies. The racist incident form, which schools are now required to complete monthly, is clear

and succinct. Link advisers play a key role in reinforcing equality issues and officers have taken an appropriately robust approach towards challenging schools to ensure that monitoring procedures and any necessary follow up action are conducted promptly. The volume of racist incidents reported is increasing. Headteachers are becoming more diligent in fulfilling their responsibility to report racist incidents.

SECTION 5: CORPORATE ISSUES

Introduction

167. The last inspection found a lack of clarity in the strategic direction of the LEA. Now education is appropriately given high priority in the vision to regenerate the borough. Political leadership and dedicated officers are committed to work in partnership with schools and other partners to effect continuous improvement, to raise standards and to promote school autonomy. Thus, there is a corporate approach to change and considerable progress has been made in defining a strategic vision. Corporate planning is now highly satisfactory.

Corporate planning

168. Elected members, officers and Sandwell's partners have developed a clear and shared vision for the social and economic regeneration of the borough, with education, and raising educational standards, at the heart of its future development. This is well reflected in the corporate vision set out in the Sandwell Plan (Community Plan). A clear framework has been developed, which ensures that planning involves all relevant parties and the council has attracted considerable funding and is utilising a number of national initiatives to address the regeneration of areas of the borough. The lifelong learning partnership serves as the agency for the delivery of the priority within the Sandwell Plan to promote a lifelong learning society. The executive director for education and head of strategy and lifelong learning sit on the board. Priorities and performance indicators in the Best Value Performance Plan and the Sandwell Plan are well aligned with those in the statutory plans for education such as the EDP and the Behaviour Support Plan. Discussion has begun on public service agreements and education has been identified as a core theme, but within the context of the Sandwell Plan.

169. Some key aspects of the council's planning are very recent and have not yet been fully implemented. The new neighbourhood strategy has been designed to deliver the council's strategic objectives, to engage communities in the decision-making process, to target resources at the most deprived areas and to develop networks of service provision. The council's staffing structure provides for executive directors to be the lead officers within the communities identified in the strategy and to play a major role in its development. This has considerable potential for the future.

170. Strategic planning within education is highly satisfactory. A stakeholders' forum, composed of business, officers, headteachers and a range of other partners, acts as a conduit for communication and consultation on key strategic education issues. The authority's aspirations for education are articulated clearly and coherently in the three-year vision, 'Signposting the Future'. This is a good

strategic document that draws together all education and lifelong learning priorities under five key headings. Each has appropriate aims and strands which set out what was achieved in 2001–2002 and what is targeted for the following two years. These are pragmatic and achievable and make appropriate links with other strategies and initiatives.

171. Education makes a good contribution to plans in which it has a partnership role to play. Good examples are in the Quality Protects Management Plan and in the Children Services Plan. Education is a key player in Grow Well, the overarching strategy which sets the context for the improvement of the health, education and welfare of all young people in the borough. The executive director of education and lifelong learning chairs the executive. A good response has been made to the neighbourhood renewal strategy through the community learning policy for schools. Through neighbourhood clusters, the policy focuses on developing excellence in primary schools to complement and extend the programmes in the secondary EiC initiative. It also draws together the education initiatives currently running; many of which are supported by external grants.

172. Other specific education plans are satisfactory overall. Planning for school improvement is sound and satisfactory progress has been made in developing the strategy for SEN. However, there are weaknesses in the school organisation plan.

173. The implementation of corporate plans is highly satisfactory and represents significant progress since the last inspection. 'Strategic Choices' was a corporate initiative to bring a holistic approach to management across the council. A culture of performance management is developing within the council, the corporate planning cycle is effectively linked to financial planning and a framework is in place for ensuring lines of responsibility are clear and approaches to planning are consistent. An information management strategy is in place but has not yet been implemented and this constrains information sharing across services.

174. The last inspection commented that performance targets for each of the services within education were insufficiently rigorous, co-ordinated and monitored by the directorate management team. Education has made good progress within the corporate performance management framework in implementing performance management and meeting the criticisms in the last report.

175. Progress since the last inspection has been highly satisfactory. Almost all the weaknesses identified have been tackled and, with a small number of exceptions, the LEA's functions are now satisfactory. Best Value reviews of the two major service areas have resulted in a significant improvement to services. Satisfactory progress has been made since the last inspection in implementing the actions within the main plans for education. However, there is no room for

complacency as many plans have not been in place long enough to have had an impact on standards and quality in schools.

Leadership of officers and elected members, and decision making

176. At the time of the last inspection many schools had lost confidence in the LEA and the strategic leadership provided by senior officers. Since that time the LEA has made significant progress and the leadership provided by the chief executive, senior officers and elected members is now good.

177. Education features highly in the council's priorities and there is cross party consensus that it is the key to the regeneration and renewal of the borough. Decision-making is now good. There are clear procedures for decision making by elected members and officers, processes are transparent and decisions are made quickly. The delegation of powers to officers is appropriate and allows them to carry out their roles effectively. A cabinet advisory team, which includes backbenchers, works closely with the portfolio holder for education, and members of the opposition parties are regularly briefed. There is a formal system for monitoring the work of the cabinet advisory team. A system of committees is being developed to underpin the neighbourhood strategy.

178. Elected members are determined to improve education and have not avoided taking difficult decisions where necessary. They have further demonstrated their commitment through the 'members challenge', which involves visits to schools to judge the impact of the council's policies, following a briefing provided by a higher education institute. The portfolio holder for education is an active participator in the work of the Sandwell stakeholders' forum.

179. Members are well informed; advice from officers, briefings, and reports on education are very clear and, generally, where necessary, well argued. This enables members to be effective in carrying out their monitoring and scrutiny role. Agendas for scrutiny committee are planned well in advance, items are well aired and decisions are well informed and challenged. The committee scrutinises the overall progress of schools but has paid insufficient attention to those schools requiring special measures and, which are not making progress. The committee, in addition to elected members, includes representatives of the diocese, parent governors and unions. The scrutiny management board, made up of the chairs of all the committees, commissions groups to deal effectively with cross cutting initiatives.

Recommendation

In order to challenge action to improve the weakest schools:

- scrutiny committee should receive regular reports on the progress made by schools requiring special measures and those with serious weaknesses.

180. The leadership of the senior officers is effective, and the leadership and vision provided by the executive director for education and lifelong learning is very good. Senior officers have a strong commitment to school improvement, to partnership working and to the autonomy of schools.

181. Consultation is now good and communication has improved although the volume of information circulated to schools is insufficiently prioritised. The senior management team makes extensive use of consultation with schools through various headteacher advisory fora, regular presentations to headteachers and an appropriate range of formal meetings. There is a clear planning framework through which decisions are made, and plans are shared and consulted upon by various representative groups. However, these groups are not always sufficiently well informed about the issues that will be on future agendas and consequently they respond in a reactive way. In response to criticism in the last inspection, a communication and consultation strategy has been put in place, a governors' representative body established and key stakeholders have been brought together to oversee the LEA's strategic planning and challenge progress. As a result, relationships between officers, schools and stakeholders are good. Nevertheless, the remit of these groups has become less clear to their members as the LEA has improved, and now needs to be re-defined in light of the progress made. Schools have recently been regrouped into six clusters in line with the council's neighbourhood strategy. There is some variation in the effectiveness of these clusters because they are new. Nevertheless, the LEA sees these groups as mechanisms through which autonomy and partnership can be developed further and they have considerable potential for the future.

Recommendations

In order to improve communication and consultation further:

- prioritise documents that are sent to schools;
- put in place a medium term agenda for the meetings of headteacher forum; and
- draw up, in consultation with schools, a clear remit for forum groups and the stakeholder group.

Partnership

182. The LEA's partnership working was judged to be good in 1998. By the inspection of 2000 it had deteriorated significantly. Good progress has been made since then and the LEA's partnership arrangements are now good and improving.

183. 'Signposting the Future' has been shared and agreed with a wide range of education stakeholders who also scrutinise its implementation and participate in its delivery. EiC is a good example of the LEA's new patterns of collaborative working and is a model for joint planning between the LEA and schools. Strategic planning and operational partnership between the LEA, EiC and EAZ are strong. Since the last inspection, education and life long learning and the EYDCP have forged strong links which are promoting better understanding and improved continuity of provision.

184. The LEA is building effective partnership arrangements with regional bodies such as the Learning and Skills Council through the 14 to 19 executive group and the Black Country school improvement partnership, in which Sandwell is a leading proponent. Through a range of regeneration initiatives effective partnerships have been developed with the local community, voluntary sector and other agencies. The LEA fulfils its statutory obligations to the SACRE and the dioceses are represented on major stakeholder groups.

185. Many initiatives and strategic plans are recently established and have not yet had time to make an impact. Nevertheless, the structures now in place have potential for improvement and the LEA can demonstrate that a number of the projects run with the community are beginning to have an impact on the achievement of children in the infant years.

APPENDIX 1: RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve the quality of planning:

- the LEA should ensure that objectives and actions included in service and unit plans are defined with sufficient precision to enable progress to be monitored accurately, and that they are costed.

In order to ensure that all schools are clear about the LEA's approach to monitoring, challenge and intervention:

- publish and communicate a protocol, which sets out clearly the LEA's intentions and expectations.

In order to improve the targeting of support for schools:

- develop criteria, which differentiate between the range of schools in category A and the support they receive.

In order to improve monitoring and challenging schools:

- introduce and agree with secondary schools more robust arrangements for challenge.

In order to increase the effectiveness of support for literacy:

- recruit and deploy leading literacy teachers to work alongside colleagues in schools.

In order to improve support for ICT across the curriculum:

- make better use of leading practitioners in schools to share good practice; and
- ensure that advisory teachers have suitable training which enhances their expertise and experience to challenge and support the use of ICT in teaching and learning.

In order to ensure that all schools understand the strategy for support for ethnic minority and traveller children:

- clarify the strategy and ensure that the respective roles and responsibilities of the SEMAP team and link advisers are made clear.

In order to improve the support provided to school management:

- ensure that the role of the CSU is promoted effectively in schools to improve their effectiveness and efficiency as purchasers of services.

In order to improve the quality of property services:

- put in place arrangements for property services which improves quality control mechanisms.

In order to improve the quality of grounds maintenance:

- ensure the renegotiation of grounds maintenance contracts take full account of the principles of Best Value.

In order to improve the quality and consistency of visits to schools:

- notes of visit should be more incisive and should record the outcome of the visit. Headteachers should complete their section of the form and the completed note should be shared with governors. As soon as possible the LEA should move to an electronic system of recording visits.

In order to ensure that all excluded pupils receive their entitlement to full time education for September 2002:

- implement the costed plan as soon as possible and ensure that elected members and senior officers rigorously monitor both the quantity and quality of provision.

In order to improve the effectiveness of provision of Key Stage 4 pupils:

- work should be undertaken to improve the arrangements for monitoring and evaluation of Key Stage 4 pupil placements with external partners.

In order to improve the management of attendance within schools:

- ensure that schools record and report on attendance accurately and consistently; and
- provide guidance to schools so that they make full use of all available data.

In order to ensure the effective and efficient deployment of staff:

- implement rigorous systems to evaluate the impact of the work of the EWS.

In order to improve child protection ensure that:

- systems are put in place where all referrals are reported to the LEA and recorded; and
- mechanisms are put in place which ensure that all children can be accounted for.

In order to challenge action to improve the weakest schools:

- scrutiny committee should receive regular reports on the progress made by schools requiring special measures and with serious weaknesses.

In order to improve communication and consultation further:

- prioritise documents that are sent to schools;
- put in place a medium term agenda for the meetings of headteacher forum; and
- draw up in consultation with schools a clear remit for forum groups and stakeholder group.

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