



**OFFICE FOR STANDARDS
IN EDUCATION**

**INSPECTION OF
SANDWELL
LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

July 1998

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

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INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection was carried out by OFSTED in conjunction with the Audit Commission under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The inspection used the Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities*, which focuses on the effectiveness of LEA work to support school improvement. In addition to the standard themes the inspection covered provision for the early years and special educational needs.

2. The inspection was in two stages. An initial review established a picture of the LEA's context, the performance of its schools, its strategy and the management of services. The initial review was based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA, school inspection and audit reports, LEA documentation, and discussions with LEA members, staff in the Education Department and other Council departments and representatives of the LEA's partners. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on respects of the LEA's work was completed by 79 out of 92 schools (representing a response rate of 86%).

3. The second stage of the inspection involved studies of the effectiveness of aspects of the LEA's work through visits to eight secondary schools, 23 primary schools and three special schools. The visits tested the views of governors, headteachers and other staff on aspects of the LEA's strategy. The visits also considered whether the support provided by the LEA contributes to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in the school and provides value for money.

4. This report draws on material from the initial review, from the school survey and from the school visits, together with evidence relevant to the themes drawn from recent HMI visits to Sandwell Schools.

July 1998

* *LEA Support for School Improvement: A Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities*, London, OFSTED, 1997

COMMENTARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5. As an education authority Sandwell Council is very much in earnest in its desire to see its schools do better. It has begun to develop practical ways to help them, after a period in which its efforts, limited as they were, had little impact. The LEA has continued meanwhile to take reasonable steps to meet its statutory duties. Its current action to support improvement has strengths, some rapidly developed in recent times, and more evident in relation to primary schools than secondary. There are also important weaknesses in the LEA's support which must be remedied if it is to make a major contribution to boosting achievement.

6. Sandwell's pupils and schools need the best help possible – and not just from the education service. The data show that disadvantage is multiple, widespread and worsening. Indices of community well-being, including health and the crime rate, are a cause for concern. In an area where school leavers' prospects of getting a job of some sort used to be good, expectations of education have long tended to be modest, as evidenced, for example, by the staying-on rate. In this context, children face great difficulties in making the most of educational opportunity. The efforts of schools to raise expectations and to push for high achievement need, therefore, particular rigour, sensitivity and persistence.

7. The danger in such circumstances is that schools will expect too little of pupils who face many problems and that raising attainment will take a poor second place to pastoral care. That danger has not been avoided in Sandwell in the past. OFSTED inspections show that the ethos of its schools is as orderly and civilised as in other areas of the country, but that there are significant weaknesses in both educational provision and school management. If the schools have been caring places they have been, with exceptions, neither challenging nor successful in relation to the standards achieved. Attendance is unsatisfactory and performance in tests and examinations among the worst in the country.

8. While for many years Sandwell has sought to provide well for its schools, it did not do enough through the early 1990s to help them to be more effective. The LEA exhorted improvement, but uncertain of its role and preoccupied with the loss of funding for central services, it was slow to pursue coherent strategies to assist schools with the problems they faced. Its performance, like that of its schools, left much to be desired.

9. That is a hard judgement, but not one that the LEA would dispute. The main finding of the inspection is that, partly through the use of grant-funded schemes and through response to recent developments in government policy, an important corner has been turned. The LEA is now finding practical expression for its commitment to promote greater ambition in its schools, through more focus on attainment, better professional dialogue and greater responsiveness to parents.

10. Conscious of the need to improve, the schools have welcomed the change to the LEA's approach. The LEA has had a reputation for openness and receptiveness: it is now being appreciated for a willingness to take more vigorous action. Relationships with schools remain good.

11. Although not yet secure, the LEA's overall planning and the implementation of its planning are improving. Its strategy, based on raising expectations, improving teaching and school management, and involving the community, is appropriate. Its priorities, rooted in awareness of local conditions, are clear. They include continued investment in the early years, an inclusive approach to special educational needs, improving basic skills and the use of performance data and target-setting. The LEA more than pulls its weight in partnership with other agencies, especially in relation to social care, health and regeneration, and has been successful in maximising funding from external sources for improvement.

12. There are now some clear strengths in the support the LEA provides to schools. The LEA is intervening more where it needs to, using OFSTED inspections as a source of evidence and as a focus of its work. A greater sense of urgency is apparent. The LEA's management support services provide technical help and efficient administrative backup and, usually, assist with solving problems. The contribution of special educational needs services, including on behaviour management, is generally positive. Curriculum support projects and training – particularly 'Quality Start' and the National Literacy Project in primary schools – are playing a significant part in improving teaching. The LEA is giving good support to governing bodies, some of which need much help on educational issues. Its assistance in the appointment of senior staff is highly valued, with LEA staff strenuous in their efforts to help governors to select appropriate candidates.

13. Schools are responding. In part arising from the LEA's recent efforts, there is evidence of improvement, more in primary and special schools than in secondary. Starting from a very low base, the overall rate of improvement in attainment in primary schools has generally been above the national rate; but, on the other hand, half the secondary schools have made little or no improvement at GCSE. There is some increase in rates of attendance. Improvement in quality and management is evident in the schools visited in this inspection, with over 80% of them making satisfactory or good headway. Progress on teaching, particularly primary and special schools, is generally good. The greatest overall progress is usually being made in the schools with the most to do, often under new leadership. There is a general belief among staff in the schools in the possibility of improvement and confidence that routes to it are signposted, even if they have yet to be fully travelled.

14. The evidence of improvement is distinct – and the schools deserve much credit for it – but it is not yet strong. It needs time and the consistent application of positive support to take firmer root. The overall contribution of the LEA to improvements in the schools visited was in most cases satisfactory. The contribution was usually somewhat stronger in the schools with the clearest need for improvement, but it was weaker in secondary schools than in primary and special schools.

15. The contribution needs to be consolidated and can be substantially better. Although the LEA has made significant strides, it needs to improve its own performance in order to provide sharper challenge and support to the schools and to make better use of the funding for improvement work which is now available. In some respects implementation of the LEA strategy has only just started. Clarity and rigour remain essential – as they do in the schools.

16. This report contains much critical analysis and makes some key recommendations. The areas where rapid action is needed are:

- **in the discipline of service delivery.** While services are generally regarded as responsive and very good on personal contact, there is a lack of clear specification, costing and evaluation across a range of services, producing inconsistency in delivery. There is not enough challenge by the schools, or within the LEA itself, about what services should be provided, how they should be provided and at what cost. Greater delegation of service funding is one way to develop greater appreciation of provision and costs. Links between services are also under-developed, although improving.
- **in the overall management of school improvement work.** There is now no shortage of people available to support Sandwell schools, but success in improvement work depends, as the LEA is aware, on more than putting in additional staff to work in schools. Better management and co-ordination of improvement work needs to be pursued within the Directorate, with close attention to embedding and sustaining development in schools and to dissemination, in order to improve the effectiveness of activities.
- **in the understanding of its schools.** The LEA has not had close understanding of all of its schools in the past, with some left to languish much too long. The LEA's understanding of its schools has improved considerably but it is still hazy in patches.
- **in the support available on the curriculum and teaching.** Investment in improvement work has been greater in primary schools than in secondary schools. While there is some effective provision for secondary schools, notably in the vocational field, there is a lack of overall curriculum guidance and insufficient stimulus and debate on issues of widespread relevance. Across the phases, while the LEA is on its way to a comprehensive working strategy to improve literacy and has the outline of an approach on numeracy, there are gaps in authoritative subject coverage.
- **in curriculum continuity,** where the lack of productive action on continuity between key stages in separate schools is a distinct handicap in an area in which efforts to raise attainment need to be sustained across the age groups.
- **in provision for bilingual learners.** Since the ending of a Section 11-funded service and its part replacement by a poorly defined project funded by the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), support for bilingual learners has deteriorated.
- **in support for school management.** The LEA is working to help schools to improve their management, but deficiencies in support include the absence of a comprehensive management development programme and, for secondary schools, a lack of pertinent support and challenge. The quality of school planning needs further attention.

- **in relation to special educational needs.** The analysis in the inspection reflects an improving picture but the implementation of some of the LEA's initiatives, including the development of 'enhanced learning provision', has not been fully considered. The new approach to provision for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties and those excluded from school needs action. While the speed at which statements are produced has improved sharply recently from a very low base, this rate of improvement needs to be maintained.
- **in support on attendance**, which needs to be provided more consistently and with clearer expectations and more advice set out on what schools themselves can do.

17. Finally, however, the message of the inspection is one of some optimism. Overall Sandwell is doing a number of things well – and better than before. Neither the LEA nor the schools visited are disposed to make excuses for low attainment. In the inspection the commitment of all concerned to serving the needs of Sandwell pupils better was palpable. The importance of coherent and focused action, which the recommendations in the main reflect, is very generally recognised. Much productive work is in train; to transform school achievement, much remains to be done.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A. *In order to achieve greater consistency in the quality of service delivery, based on knowledge of school needs, the LEA should:*

- (i) enable the Directorate to exercise closer oversight of the management and co-ordination of services;
- (ii) produce a manual covering all services and setting out functions, entitlements and options, means of access and costs;
- (iii) ensure a common approach to planning and evaluation across services and agree a process of annual review of delivery, involving both schools and councillors;
- (iv) improve communication across teams so that intelligence of school needs is pooled to enable prompt, concerted action which meets them;
- (v) consider again with schools which aspects of service delivery could be better served through delegation of funding;
- (vi) rationalise the organisation of personnel services and consider how schools can receive broader advice on personnel management, including staff development.

B. *In order to improve the support available to schools on teaching, the curriculum and pupils' attainment, the LEA should:*

- (i) strengthen the arrangements for the co-ordination of school improvement work at the Directorate level;
- (ii) develop a more coherent and radical approach to improvement work in secondary school;
- (iii) set out the objectives, methods, resources and means of evaluation of all its curriculum services;
- (iv) produce an overview of the approaches to teaching, assessment and curriculum continuity being promoted by its various projects;
- (v) audit and make a clear statement about the advice and activities which can be provided on subjects, and identify with school how gaps can be filled;
- (vi) quickly step up its work on numeracy, in particular taking action with secondary schools whose results are poor to promote greater success in GCSE mathematics or alternative accreditation;
- (vii) in devising its plan for responding to the National Literacy Strategy, ensure that:
 - (a) a systematic analysis of strengths and weaknesses in the teaching of literacy leads to more closely tailored support;
 - (b) elements of existing work in a variety projects, including those affecting pupils with special educational needs and bilingual learners, are drawn together;
 - (c) practical help is given to secondary schools on managing an effective approach to literacy development;
- (viii) review the operation of the Curriculum Access Project with a view to focusing the language enrichment team on bilingual learners, bringing the teachers concerned under school management, and merging the curriculum enhancement team with other support teams.

C. *In order to promote improvement in the management and efficiency of schools, the LEA should:*

- (i) provide more pertinent, wide-ranging and intensive support for secondary school managers on common whole-school issues;
- (ii) review its advice on, and seek improvement in, the quality of school planning, aligning this with the use of performance data in setting targets;

- (iii) create a management development programme which covers different groups of staff and provides systematically for needs to be specified and met;
- (iv) widen its efforts to promote greater consciousness for cost-effectiveness, including, but not only, in the use of external services.

D. *In order to improve provision for special educational needs, the LEA should:*

- (i) take action to rationalise its special school provision in the light of its shift in policy;
- (ii) maintain the rate of improvement in the processing of statements of special educational needs and ensure that pupils in specialist provision are covered by statements;
- (iii) produce full specifications for enhanced learning provision, covering admissions, organisation, expenditure and monitoring;
- (iv) sustain its efforts to ensure better understanding in schools of funding for special educational needs and how they should plan to use it to best effect.

E. *In order to improve its work on attendance, the LEA should:*

- (i) issue a revised policy on attendance, establish clear criteria for referrals to Education Welfare Officers and monitor casework and its outcomes;
- (ii) renew its advice on how schools can actively address poor attendance and ensure that link advisers pursue action with schools where necessary.

F. *In order to exercise its responsibilities in relation to exclusions better, the LEA should:*

- (i) undertake routine analysis of fixed-term exclusions, school-by-school and by ethnic group, and act on the outcomes;
- (ii) secure prompt and appropriate placement for all pupils permanently excluded from schools.

G. *In order to produce more effective provision the LEA should:*

- (i) as it intends, review secondary places and the provision made for sixth form education;
- (ii) review its policy, practice and expenditure on home-to-school transport.

SECTION 1: THE CONTEXT OF LEA

The District

18. Sandwell, in the heart of the densely populated West Midlands conurbation, is made up of six towns, each with a strong sense of identity: Oldbury, Rowley Regis, Smethwick, Tipton, Wednesbury and West Bromwich. The setting is industrial, with areas of dereliction and few green spaces.

19. Sandwell's population, now at 292,800, has been falling for some 15 years. Of the metropolitan districts Sandwell has the fourth highest proportion of its population from minority ethnic groups (14.7%), with the largest groups being those of Indian (7.9%) and African-Caribbean (2.7%) origin. The proportion of school pupils from minority ethnic groups is 23.9% compared with 10.6% nationally.

20. Sandwell is the ninth most deprived district in England and the third most deprived outside London. The level of deprivation worsened between 1981 and 1991 relative to other areas. Sandwell does not have the concentrations of deprivation of some other areas; instead, deprivation is evenly distributed, with virtually no areas of affluence. Deprivation is also generally consistent across the indicators. So, for example: despite a recent fall, to 9.5% in November 1996, unemployment remains well above the average UK rate (6.6%); in 1996 over half Sandwell's households had incomes of under £10,000 per year; about 40% of housing is in public ownership and half of all the dwellings are in the lowest two bands of council tax valuations.

21. In addition, Sandwell has high levels of traffic, with associated levels of noise, pollution and accidents. Its population is relatively unhealthy, as evidenced by infant birth weights, poor diet and rates of exercise among young people, the numbers with limiting long-term illness, and the ages at which adults die.

Pupils and schools

22. The main figures are given in Appendix 1. Among other features:

- Sandwell has 144 schools; there are two secondary grant-maintained (GM) schools and no independent schools in the district;
- of the 91 schools with Key Stage 1 pupils, 77 have nursery facilities, and the extent of provision for under-fives at nursery or primary schools is the second highest in England;
- although the percentage of pupils with statements of special educational needs is lower than nationally, the percentage of pupils in Sandwell's nine day and two residential special schools is higher, although reducing;
- the number of primary school children has risen during the 1990s and is currently 28,554; and while secondary school rolls have fallen to 17,230, they are expected to rise by some 11% by 2001;

- there is currently a 4% overall shortage of places in primary schools, but reducing, with about half the schools more than 5% over capacity;
- a 12% surplus of places in secondary schools is projected to reduce because of growing numbers of 5%, but currently five LEA-maintained schools and one GM school have surpluses of over 25%, while four LEA-maintained schools and one GM school are more than 5% over capacity, and there are 1000 places in temporary accommodation;
- currently, 104 pupils are receiving education otherwise than at school by LEA home or hospital tuition and the five pupil referral units (PRUs) currently cater for 182 pupils at a cost of £1.185m;
- a high proportion of primary pupils is taught in classes of over 30, although the pupil/teacher ratio is proportionally closer to the national figure; plans for use of a Standards Fund grant will eliminate 170 classes over 30 in 1998/99 by the employment of 65 additional teachers;
- the numbers staying-on in post-16 education are much lower than the national figures, with under a third of those staying on doing so at school, and the highest rate being among Asian pupils, at 79.2%, compared with 66.7% of African-Caribbean and 48.1% of white pupils.

The Council, the Education Committee and the Department

23. In the late 1980s the Council restructured its decision-making and delivery of services to reflect legislation and changed priorities and to provide a focus for the Council's community governance approach. The Education and Community Services Department was formed in 1995 by the merger of the previously separate Education and Leisure departments.

24. The political make-up of the Council is 60 Labour, nine Liberal Democrat, two Conservative and one Independent Labour

25. The Education and Community Services Strategy Committee meets six times a year. Among its terms of reference for education are the evaluation of schools, the monitoring of the operation of the Local Management of Schools (LMS) scheme and responsibility for links with external agencies. A Chairs Sub-Committee deals with urgent matters and with specified types of complaints and appeals. The Schools Committee, whose membership is drawn from the Strategy Committee, in practice deals with almost all school business, making reports to the Strategy Committee as appropriate.

26. The Department's Directorate is supported by 20 Principal Officers with responsibility for service operations. The three members of the Directorate work in concert rather than through sharply defined line management. Their collegiate style is encouraged and necessitated by the links and overlaps between some of their areas of responsibility. The Head of Policy and Community Services covers leisure services, adult education and youth services, leads on regeneration work, and supervises a range of professional, administrative and technical services. The remit

of the Head of Schools and Library Services is wide, covering 12 groups providing services for schools and pupils, including education psychologists and support teachers. Other special needs services are under a Principal Officer, also reporting to the Head of Schools and Library Services.

27. Private contractors have run catering, cleaning and grounds maintenance since 1994 and the local careers service since 1996.

Education funding

28. Funding for 1997/98 was £119.6m (the general school budget), £101.3m (the potential school budget) and £93.3m (the aggregated school budget). Of the potential school budget 92.15% was delegated. Of the total primary and secondary aggregated schools budget 83.8% was distributed as pupil-led funding.

29. The Council has traditionally spent above its Standard Spending Assessment for primary and secondary education. Based on Audit Commission figures for 1995/96 the cost per pupil comparisons with other districts are: under-fives £2054 (seventh highest); primary 5+ £1646 (fifth highest); secondary under-16 £2320 (fifth highest); and secondary 16+ £3190 (ninth highest). The provision of education in Sandwell is therefore at a higher cost than other districts.

30. The Council has sought to maintain a high level of resources for provision with schools. Education took total reductions of £17.8m from 1991/92 to 1997/98, with a large share borne by the Department's senior management and its services. Current service costs are considered in Section 3. Reductions in school budgets over the same period translated into some 225 posts in secondary and 76 posts in primary schools. The operation of LMS means that some schools have faced greater budget constraints than others with, overall, primary and special schools able to retain more comfortable balances than secondary schools.

31. A feature of Sandwell's expenditure is the extent of provision for special educational needs. The allocation through the LMS formula represents 9.2% of the aggregated schools budget. Adding support services costs, the LEA attributed in 1996/97 16.8% of its spending on schools to special educational needs.

Expenditure on provision for special educational needs - £ per pupil 1996/97	Sandwell	Statistical Neighbours	Metropolitan districts
ASB per pupil in special schools	£7313	£7363	£7500
SEN statements – mainstream – average all pupils	£29.2	£26.0	£40.49
LMS allocation – mainstream – average all pupils	£148.38	n/a	n/a

32. The LEA has had success in bids for capital resources. Examples in 1996/97 were two allocations from the Schools Renewal Challenge fund totalling \$4.049m and funding from the Council's corporate resources for disabled access.

SECTION 2: THE PERFORMANCE OF SCHOOLS

33. Details of the educational performance of Sandwell schools are given in Appendix 2. The data used in this section are illustrative, not comprehensive.

34. **The attainment of pupils to Sandwell's nursery and reception classes in most schools inspected by OFSTED is below or well below national expectations.** Attainment on entry was judged low in three-fifths of the primary schools.

35. **Attainment in Sandwell schools remains generally very low at all the stages of compulsory education.** For example:

- in 1997, Sandwell was ranked 122nd out of 132 LEAs for the performance of its schools at Level 4 in the Key Stage 2 English tests and 131st in the mathematics tests;
- in 1997, Sandwell was ranked 125th out of 132 LEAs on the percentage of its pupils achieving five or more grades A*-C certificates at GCSE and 114th on the percentage achieving five or more grades A*-G. Performance in English was better than in other major subjects.
- LEA analysis shows that girls consistently out-perform boys and that there is a large difference in achievement between pupils from Indian, white and African-Caribbean backgrounds (relatively high) and pupils from Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities (relatively low). Children from the Indian community are the most, and those from the Bangladeshi community the least, successful: this reflects the distribution of entitlement to free school meals.

36. **Levels of attainment have risen in both the primary and, to a lesser extent, in the secondary phase, but a significant proportion of secondary schools is making little progress.** For example:

- the LEA's monitoring of reading through tests at Year 3 and Year 6 shows a clear improvement since 1991, especially in the percentage of poor readers;
- the percentage of pupils achieving Level 4 in the Key Stage 2 English tests rose between 1995 and 1997 from 32% to 52%;
- the percentage of pupils achieving Level 4 in the Key Stage 2 mathematics tests rose between 1995 and 1997 from 26% to 46%;
- the percentages of pupils attaining Level 5 or above in the Key Stage 3 tests improved a little between 1995 and 1997, more so in English than in mathematics and science;
- however, the percentage of pupils gaining five or more grades A*-C at GCSE fell slightly from 28% to 27% between 1994 and 1997;

- the percentage of pupils gaining five or more grades A*-G at GCSE remained at 82% between 1994 and 1997.
- ten of the 20 secondary schools either declined or made no gains in the average total GCSE points score per pupil between 1994 and 1997.

37. Starting from a very low base the overall rate of improvement in attainment in primary schools has generally been above the national rate. However, in contrast with the national picture, there has been no overall improvement at the end of compulsory secondary education. For example:

- between 1995 and 1997 the percentage of Sandwell pupils attaining Level 2 at Key Stage 1 rose at a similar rate to the national in English, at a higher rate in mathematics, but in science remained static;
- the percentage of pupils gaining Level 4 or above in the Key Stage 2 English tests rose by 20 points between 1995 and 1997, compared with 15 points nationally;
- the percentage of pupils gaining Level 4 or above in the Key Stage 2 mathematics test rose by 20 points between 1995 and 1997, compared with 18 points nationally;
- the percentage of pupils gaining five or more grades A*-C at GCSE fell slightly between 1994 and 1997, while it rose nationally by 2.4 points;
- the percentage of pupils gaining 5 or more grades A*-G passes at GCSE did not rise between 1994 and 1997, while it rose nationally by 1.4 points.

38. OFSTED inspection data confirm that attainment is generally below national norms for all subjects of the curriculum, although performance in a few subjects in each key stage was not significantly worse than national norms. For ethos, Sandwell schools are judged only slightly below national figures. However, Sandwell schools compare very unfavourably on both the quality of the education they provide and the quality of their management. Overall, relatively few primary and secondary schools were judged to be very good or good and the proportions of schools requiring some or much improvement were significantly greater than nationally. Up to February 1998, seven Sandwell schools were judged to require special measures to resolve the problems identified : four primary schools, two secondary schools and one PRU. Two secondary schools, 14 primary schools and three special schools were found by inspectors to have serious weaknesses.

39. Overall rates of attendance in Sandwell schools are low, although improvement was evident between 1996 and 1997, with increases of 1.6 percentage points for primary schools and 1.1 for secondary schools. This improvement means that, in 1997, 74% of schools had attendance of 90% or above, compared with 52% in 1996. The incidence of permanent exclusions from primary schools in 1997 was in line with national figures. Proportionally more boys were excluded from Sandwell secondary schools than were excluded nationally.

SECTION 3: LEA STRATEGY

ROLE AND PRIORITIES

In its efforts to improve schools the LEA has moved on from exhortation to a clear specification of its tasks and a strategy to carry them out. There is greater urgency in its approach, welcomed in schools. Much of the funding for improvement work has come from grants which the LEA has sought with energy. The co-ordination and dissemination of this work and the need to transform school management are the key problems for the strategy. The Department's planning has clear priorities and is developing, but current evaluation arrangements are partial. Consultation is extensive with headteachers and staff, but a significant number of headteachers believe that the LEA still does not understand their schools well enough.

40. Sandwell has traditionally sought to make extensive provision for education and to fund and support it well. Within the Council's budgetary process education has had a high priority, most obviously in recent years when that priority has been maintained at the expense of some other Council services. Commitment to education has also been a key element in the approach taken by the Council, along with its partners, to regeneration initiatives since 1993.

41. The LEA has acknowledged the need to improve standards in schools over the years and has sought to alter attitudes in schools so that a more positive approach to raising standards is taken, in what are recognised as difficult circumstances. Raising expectations has been a theme to which conferences and discussions with headteachers in particular have regularly returned in 1992.

42. There has, however, been a strong sense in the LEA that its work was handicapped through the 1990s by reductions in the funding of departmental management and services, especially the Advisory Service. This is not to say that no action for improvement has been possible. The LEA can and does print, for example, to the maintenance of management support services and for schools and to a good deal of work on pupils' behaviour and on special educational needs which has continued unabated through the decade.

43. The LEA has now re-defined its role in relation to the support of schools in a more active fashion. The re-definition renews efforts to establish a consensus that expectations and attainment can be raised significantly – a consensus intended to displace a view, regarded by senior officers as once common in schools, that the focus of schools should be on meeting the pastoral needs of their pupils whilst tacitly accepting that attainment would necessarily remain low for the majority. Although in the past LEA officers have worked to change this view, there is evidence that, until recently, the LEA has been too tolerant of weaknesses in school management by which Sandwell's service has been marked.

44. Much of the LEA's recent development work has taken place through projects funded by external grants, notably City Challenge and the SRB, for which the Council has been, with its partners, a keen and successful bidder. These grant

regimes have had considerable advantages – and some disadvantages. The advantages stem from the extent of the funding and from the encouragement, first, to focus on achievement, and second, to pursue integrated solutions. The main disadvantages arise from the disparities in the funding regimes and from the fact that some of the projects have needed to be focused in particular areas of Sandwell rather than applied across the district.

45. There have, therefore, been three imperatives in pursuing improvement: a need to co-ordinate projects on curriculum and teaching to avoid fragmentation; a need to extend developments to other schools; and critically, a need to improve school management. The LEA's current agenda pursues those goals more deliberately. Funding for improvement work has been increased since a low point in the mid-1990's. Given the present extent of funding, there is no doubting the availability of resources for schools to pursue improvement.

Council priorities

46. The Council, as some of its sterner internal critics, members and officers, have said, was in the past rather better at funding services than at enquiring closely into their use and benefit. In recent years the Council's leadership has sought changes in culture and organisation, taking a more corporate stance on setting priorities and deciding expenditure and adopting a more coherent approach to programme management. The Council is keen to embrace the proposed 'best value' regime and has identified particular services for corporate review, including youth and community centres, residential centres and library services.

47. The Council's priorities are now set out at the start of the budget cycle. For 1998/99 the priorities are:

- 'to improve significantly levels of educational achievement in the district by the year 2000;
- to improve significantly housing conditions in the district by the year 2000;
- to reduce the measured level of deprivation through improvements in the physical, environmental, economic and social conditions of the district by the year 2000.'

48. Education and leisure services were brought together under a new committee and within a new department in April 1995. The motives were in part pragmatic, but also reflected a desire to improve connections. Action to exploit the advantages of the arrangement has been delayed by the need to handle the organisational consequences of the merger, but developments are beginning to emerge, for example in new strategies for the arts and sport.

Education planning

49. Planning of the new joint service has been on a rolling three-year basis in accordance with the Council's policy planning process. The planning document available at the beginning of the inspection was produced in July 1997 and covered

1997-2000. Together with a subsequent draft education development plan, this document represents the department's main planning tool. The document was subject to wide consultation. The vision statement that prefaces it emphasises the need to balance competing aims. It says that the goal is:

'to promote a quality service that is enterprising, challenging and promotes excellence whilst being effective, caring and supportive; that gives all individuals an equal opportunity to determine and fulfil their academic, vocational, physical, social and cultural potential within the community, whilst specifically targeting the Council's priority groups.'

50. The planning document sets out themes, alphabetically, and gives objectives, actions, performance measures and timescales associated with these themes. Intentions for work on key features of school provision update those given in earlier plans. They emphasise support and encouragement to schools, through effective consultation, the promotion and dissemination of good practice by major initiatives, and the provision of quality services.

51. The structure of the plan, including the alphabetical arrangement, is not helpful. The themes are a mix of substance (such as arts development) and process (such as consultation and planning); they also mix issues about the internal workings of the Department with functions the Department carries out. The outcome fragments rather than consolidates the Committee's and the Department's concerns. This impression of fragmentation is stronger in the separate development plans for the service units, on which Section 4 comments.

52. The planning arrangements with respect to school improvement have, however, been taken forward with the production of a draft education development plan, focusing on school improvement, on which there has been recent consultation with schools. The plan sets five tasks for the LEA – to:

- 'set demanding targets in partnership with schools;
- increase knowledge of the learning process and appropriate teaching strategies;
- review and support curriculum and qualification development;
- promote collaboration between schools to share and develop good practice;
- intervene where schools are causing concern.'

53. A fuller presentation of what these five tasks involve and how they link to activities listed in the plan would be helpful.

54. The plan sets out what the LEA expects school to do. Very evident in the list is that schools are expected to promote a culture of high expectations, professional dialogue, evaluation and responsiveness to parents. Implicit is the view that this involves a change in culture in some or many schools.

55. The objectives which follow are grouped under five headings, with each objective covered by individual development plans: raising standards and school improvement (picking up on existing projects and indicating new developments, outlined in Section 4 of this report); governance, access and equality (covering the provision and review of school and out-of-school places); learning environment and

property management; and resources (which, among other things, refers to further delegation within the LMS scheme and a review of the formula).

56. The plan sets out, in graphic form, a management framework that shows how arrangements for consultation and decision-making will be made in the future, in order, among other things, to accommodate new forums for governors, early years, admissions and school organisation.

57. The design of the draft plan is incomplete. There is no section on the LEA context which sets out the priority needs – an absence which is acknowledged; not all the aims and objectives are followed through; the relationships between the elements are not neatly tied up; success criteria are treated inconsistently; and costs are not detailed. The plan does, however, have basic merits. Focusing on raising standards, it provides a re-statement of the role of the LEA and gives clear pointers on what schools should do. It establishes a structure which covers much, if not all, of the Department's work with schools and pupils and reflects an intention to establish a basis for co-ordinated action on a range of fronts. It seeks to bring together existing work in school improvement with new developments inspired by legislation. Finally, it indicates broadly how the LEA will intervene in schools which are causing concern.

58. Other points about the plan are clear:

- there is a great deal of improvement work going on, with most of the main activities on school improvement being no more than 15 months old and a good number starting in spring 1998;
- the elements covering primary schools hold together rather better than for secondary;
- work to review provision for special educational needs and education out of school is especially highlighted;
- the coverage of some issues is full while of others, notably aspects of subject development, it is sketchy;
- while there is reference to the importance of continuity and progression, there is little indication of any work across the primary/secondary boundary, although a good deal on transition from Key Stage 4;
- work with parents is high on the agenda in relation to the early years, but slips down it in relation to the later years;
- efforts to improve rates of attendance are not prominent, although there is an objective of revising and updating the LEA's attendance policy in order to produce effective strategies for improving attendance by May 1998.

59. A draft of the update of the wider policy planning document for 1998-2000 was available towards the end of the inspection. This accommodates the draft education development plan and the new corporate priorities. The plan's first aim and associated action plan continue the emphasis on raising standards. The shape

is clearer and neater than previous versions. One aim focuses on the development of service structures. Another is to achieve the Commission for Racial Equality quality standards. There are more signs of the potential signs of the benefits for young people of the merger of education and leisure services, for example in the proposal to develop a policy on study support. However, an aim to promote improvement in the health of Sandwell residents omits reference to schools.

60. In summary, therefore, the Department's overall planning for school improvement is developing with clear intentions for coverage of most of the needs that are significant across Sandwell schools. The draft education development plan, incomplete as it is, and the latest policy planning document are an advance in terms of focus and shape. The statement of the LEA's key tasks would benefit from greater elaboration.

Evaluating effectiveness

61. The management framework set out in the education development plan will allow for systematic evaluation of its implementation, but how this is to be done is not evident at this stage. The current policy planning process provides a basis for consideration of objectives and performance by the Directorate and the Strategy Committee. Beyond this, the work of individual education services is not routinely considered by councillors, although in-depth reviews of aspects of education provision or particular services are commissioned corporately or by the Strategy Committee and generally involve councillors as well as officers. A recent example is provision for special educational needs. Other services make use of surveys and identify problems through routine contracts with schools. Evaluations of school improvement projects are usually based on quantifiable progress in pupils' performance and involve an external perspective. By their nature, the arrangements for the evaluation of some of the long-term projects postpone consideration of their impact on attainment until close to the end.

62. The Strategy Committee has not received substantial reports in the recent past on school standards. For example, the paper received on 1997 examination results was brief; and while, a review of the 1996 National Curriculum Key Stage 2 tests was reported, the report did not pursue the implications for Sandwell. The Schools Committee receives rather more – for example, summaries of school inspections, although not detailed analyses of them.

Communication and consultation

63. Consultation between the LEA and its governors, headteachers and teachers is extensive, both within formal groups, which meet regularly and with a sense of purpose – more often for headteachers and teacher representatives than for governors – and informally through channels which draw on the willingness for officers to listen and respond. Aided by its compact size and management style, the LEA has built up a deserved reputation for openness and receptiveness.

64. Consultations on policy and procedures, such as on the budget and the LMS scheme, have been interleaved over the years with efforts, in a variety of forms, to persuade schools of the need to raise expectations and improve standards. This has

included working groups involving 150 teachers and discussions through the local strategic forum for education and training set up by the Sandwell Training and Enterprise Council (TEC).

65. The school survey carried out before the inspection showed that the LEA's involvement of schools forming its priorities was rated adequate. In the schools visited there were no complaints from headteachers about any lack of consultation. There were, however, concerns: first, that consultation can be untidy, with debate going on in different forums; and, second, that there was not enough hard discussion about implementing the proposals.

66. On the whole, governors met in inspection were more than content with the opportunities for consultation. Although there was a feeling that consultation was sometimes less about debate than information-giving, at the same time there was an admission that governors very often needed the information and had little to say on policy proposals not specific to their schools.

67. Arrangements for consultation with the trade unions representing staff in schools are regarded as productive. Potential or actual difficulties on employment matters, whether generic or concerned with particular cases, are invariably resolved without fuss. For the teacher unions a benefit of the arrangements is the way in which early information is provided on LEA developments.

68. There are opportunities for individual parents and community groups to express views within specific projects. This is particularly noticeable, for example, within the multi-agency centres. However, the parents spoken to did not believe that they in practice wielded much influence on the LEA's policies.

The schools' response to the LEA strategy

69. The school visits gave a positive picture of the relationships between the LEA and its schools. In this small authority, and one in which many staff, both in schools and in the LEA, have spent much of their careers, individual members and officers are well known in schools, and personal contact clearly counts for a good deal. Overwhelmingly – and much more so than shown in the school survey – headteachers see the LEA as a supportive organisation, despite the reduction in its central staffing, and one that is now driving change. There is a clear awareness of the commitment, announced for a number of years, to raising standards. The articulation of a strategy to pursue it is perceived as more recent. The LEA is seen as increasingly purposeful in implementing its priorities – something it has not been notable for in the past.

70. Concerns about the strategy remain. Secondary headteachers are able to identify less action relevant to their schools than their primary colleagues. The management and co-ordination of projects, and their links with the work of the Advisory Service, need attention, with some finding the provision fragmented and confusing. Too little has been done on transition between key stages. Practical action in some fields can take too long and depend much on the way schools take up the challenge. In this respect, some headteachers and other staff felt strongly that the LEA had for some years been too tolerant of slow or limited response: it had

simply not expected enough from schools. The need for stronger support for school management, especially in secondary schools, was heavily underlined. As the school survey also shows, a significant number of headteachers feel that their schools are still not well enough known and understood by the LEA.

BUDGET PLANNING AND EXPENDITURE

€ *The approach to budget planning is sound but presentation of information on the funding for school improvement has gaps. Expenditure on some central services, including home-to-school transport, appears high, but on management and administration it is low. The level of delegation to schools is about average. Many primary schools have built up significant budget surpluses.*

71. The LEA's approach to planning the education budget has been conditioned for some years by a commitment to protecting school budgets. During the 1990s expenditure on centrally managed services was reduced significantly. After consultation with schools, the funding for most services has been retained centrally, although the overall amount of the potential school budget delegated is about the national average. The schools library service, Resource Matters, and the Education Microtechnology Unit (EMU), were subject to delegation in 1992, payroll and pensions and Schools Financial Services in 1996 and property maintenance in 1997. In the case of EMU and School Financial Services, more money comes back than goes out. By an usual agreement with schools all the delegated funding for property maintenance is returned to a pool. The buy-back of school library services is falling and in 1997/98 was under half the allocation.

72. Expenditure on some services in Sandwell, such as residential education, home-to-school transport, building repair and maintenance and support for special educational needs, remains comparatively high. On the other hand, expenditure on management and administration related to schools within the Department and other Council departments is below the national figures and those for the LEA's statistical neighbours. Expenditure on the Advisory Service has also been relatively low, although substantial funding for curriculum development has been gained through external grants and recent steps have been taken to increase the LEA funding for the Advisory Service.

72. Analysis puts three areas of relatively high expenditure in context:

- with a budget for **home-to-school transport** in 1997/98 of £1.865m, the LEA policy means that a relatively high proportion of children receives assistance. There is also high cost arising from the transport for children with special educational needs. In the light of provision for special educational needs and the fact that the last full review of transport policy was in 1993, the LEA should investigate it again in the near future.
- The LEA's long-standing commitment to **residential centres** continues, in part reflecting the Council's anti-poverty strategy. Four centres with different curriculum coverage have costs of £1.089m, met by central funds of £486,300

and by charges. The promotion of subsidised places for families on income support is nearly twice the proportion in the district receiving this support.

- The high level of expenditure on **building repair and maintenance** is in part explained by the inclusion of expenditure on health and safety, major works (treated as capital in some other LEAs) and excess insurance payments. Sandwell also much temporary accommodation, which tends to be expensive to maintain. Overall expenditure in 1997/98 was £3.68m, set against the LEA's estimate from condition surveys of £42m to deal with the backlog of repairs.

74. The school survey shows that schools are only moderately satisfied that their views are reflected in the budget process, despite regular information and consultation. The LEA's internal approach to the budget process is, however, sound. It would help understanding if budget documents spelled out more fully the funding from all sources and where the expenditure goes. The extent to which school expenditure under the Standards Fund is monitored is also not clear.

75. The LEA meets its statutory duties on school budgets and the maintenance of its LMS scheme. The timelines and intelligibility of financial information are generally regarded in schools as at least adequate, although there are problems, including with the late close-down of accounts. While review of the LMS scheme involves wide consultation, the survey showed that headteachers are only moderately satisfied with the LMS scheme, about 70% thought the level of delegation was about right.

76. Cumulative school balances at the end of 1996/97 were £3.073m in primary (7%), £554,000 in secondary (2%) and £567,000 in special (9%) schools. The schools' approach is affected in part by cautious LEA advice about covering the possibility of long-term sickness in the absence of a pooled 'insurance' scheme. Nevertheless the figure for primary schools is high, with about a quarter of primary schools with balances over 10%. On the other hand, seven primary schools and one secondary school had deficits, with one primary school having a deficit over 5%. Action on surplus and deficit budgets is covered in Section 5.

SCHOOL PLACES AND ADMISSIONS

€ *The LEA provides very well for nursery education. An active approach has been taken to the provision of school places in the primary phase; a review is planned and needed in the secondary phase. Most parents in obtaining a place at their preferred school. Monitoring of exclusions needs improvement.*

77. The LEA makes a very good level of **nursery provision**, with places for virtually all parents who want them for their children. The LEA's recently agreed early years development plan takes forward work, covered in Section 5, to maintain and improve the quality of the provision.

78. Area reviews have been carried out since the last full review of **primary provision** in 1994. The LEA's management of the provision has been active, pursuing a policy of closing infant and junior schools and opening primary schools as

well as removing surplus places. There is currently a 4% shortage of places against nominal capacity, naturally reducing but unevenly spread.

79. A major re-organisation of **secondary provision** was undertaken in 1992. Decisions on the proposals led to the closure of three 11-16 schools, together with a sixth form college. One school proposed for closure at the same time was given GM status. In the secondary sector there is now a 12% overall surplus of places, projected to reduce to 5%. Key to this surplus is substantial variation between individual schools in different areas, with a third of schools having 25% of their places unfilled and several schools being more than 5% over capacity. Differences in the popularity of schools amount for the rise in the number of admission appeals. The LEA also identifies the loss of pupils to selective secondary schools in other areas as a significant issue, both in relation to surplus places and school performance. A review of secondary provision is needed to determine the precise nature and cause of the variations between individual schools and to rationalise the provision. Such a recommendation is made in a recent report from District Audit.

80. The LEA is also considering a review of **sixth form provision**. Currently, seven of the Sandwell secondary schools provide sixth form places for 16-18 year olds but some of these have small numbers of students. It would be appropriate for this to be carried out in conjunction with the review of 11-16 places.

81. The LEA takes appropriate steps on **admissions**. The arrangements to inform parents are thorough, and the advice and quality of presentation are generally good. Although the number of appeals has increased substantially in the last year, the vast majority of parents are successful in obtaining their first preference. A survey of parent satisfaction with admission arrangements has been carried out.

82. The LEA provides advice to schools to ensure that **exclusions** are used appropriately and it has procedures to monitor permanent exclusions. The LEA pursues reinstatement or, more usually, alternative places for permanently excluded pupils. It does not routinely analyse data on fixed-term exclusions, nor the amount of time permanently excluded pupils are out of school before they are found alternative provision. A recent external study funded through the SRB raises issues about the exclusion rates for pupils of African-Caribbean origin and about the LEA's procedures for ensuring that excluded pupils benefit from work set by the excluding school or from home tuition during periods out of school.

THE LEA STRATEGY FOR EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

€ *The strategy on special educational needs has been updated and is being pursued, but more remains to be done, including on special school places and the use of funding in mainstream schools, and to maintain improvement in the previously very low rate at which statements of special educational needs are issued.*

83. The LEA produced its special educational needs policy in 1995. This straightforward policy sets out the general principals of provision and identifies the prospective client groups, but does not specify the exact range of provision available and now needs to be updated in the light of developments.

84. Over the last year or so the LEA has improved its strategic thinking and increased the rate at which it is addressing important issues. After a period of extended consultation it has begun to implement a programme of reviews and actions that seeks to improve the efficiency and effectiveness with which funding is used to meet special educational needs. It has had some success in this respect but there is more to be done. Action is overdue, for example, on the growing number of unfilled places in the LEA's schools for pupils with moderate learning difficulties and the inadequate provision for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties. This has resulted in uncertainty amongst the staff and pupils in the special schools. The LEA has now properly turned its attention to a full consideration of the number, type and location of its special schools. The Schools Committee endorsed in January 1998 a plan that seeks to re-structure and rationalise the number and age phase of special schools and to increase the inclusion of pupils with statements in mainstream schools, in large part through enhanced learning provision (ELP).

85. Appropriate procedures for the assessment of pupils and completion of statements of special educational needs are in place. The LEA sets out to provide a parent-friendly service in relation to statutory assessments. The level of personal contact has been a positive feature, but until recently the rate at which statements of special educational needs have been completed has been very poor, with only 1.84% of statements completed within the expected timescale in 1996/97. The figure has advanced significantly, to above 40%. Visits to schools revealed improving levels of satisfaction about the process, although there are still too many pupils without statements in some of the specialist provision. The LEA makes good use of panels for decisions about assessment and the determination of the provision required. A measure of satisfaction with the LEA's procedures is the low rate of appeals to the regional tribunal.

86. Provision for pupils with statements in mainstream schools is funded directly by the LEA. Those with less pronounced needs are funded through the LMS formula according to criteria relating to the overall level of need. This represents a change in approach from the arrangements existing until two years ago which used free school meals as a proxy measure. The LEA is currently seeking to ensure that schools use the funding appropriately. Following an earlier exercise, a carefully selected sample of schools has been chosen for study.

87. A major review has recently taken place of the LEA's five PRUs. The Schools Committee resolved in January 1998 that they be re-structured to create a unified service under a single co-ordinator. In future the service will provide separate units for each of Key Stages 2, 3 and 4 as well as an all-stage unit for pupils with medical conditions, a unit for schoolgirl mothers and an assessment base for excluded pupils prior to re-admission. The service will also have oversight of the home and hospital tuition service. The intention is to provide more coherent provision than exists at present. The plan should also allow the LEA to ensure that effective provision is made at the earliest stage for all excluded pupils.

LIAISON WITH OTHER SERVICES AND AGENCIES

€ ***LEA members and officers place particular emphasis on working with partners to improve provision and raise standards. Liaison with other agencies is generally very positive, with good links with Social Services, the Sandwell TEC and the Health Authority.***

88. Examples of inter-department co-operation include work with the Social Services Department arranged and monitored through a range of meetings. Procedures and training on child protection are well developed. The Department has recently taken on the lead role in developing the Council's under-eights strategy. The early years development plan sets out the intentions of the Early Years Development Partnership in planning the provision and integration of child care and education.

89. The six multi-agency centres in the Tipton area are successful examples of inter-agency working which reflect the principles articulated in the early years development plan. The centres were set up in 1993 through a partnership of the Council, the Sandwell TEC, the Health Authority, the Careers Service and other agencies. The centres, together with the Parental Support Project, were designed to give the primary schools to which they are attached the chance to involve parents as first educators. The end-of-project review in January 1998 identified several positive outcomes in relation to attitudes and skills, and the LEA is following up pupils' progress in literacy and numeracy.

90. Links are maintained with a broad range of organisations, including those representing minority ethnic communities. The Standing Conference on Religious Education (SACRE) is a significant point of contact with minority communities in this multi-faith area. The work of the SACRE has been handicapped by the lack of advisory support for religious education.

91. Liaison with the three relevant diocesan authorities is appropriate on matters about individual schools but less satisfactory in other respects. There is willingness on all sides to hold discussions on general issues, including school improvement, but means have not been found to organise these systematically.

92. The Sandwell Regeneration Partnership, of which the Council and Sandwell TEC are key members, is of particular note. The partnership was originally set up for the Tipton City Challenge but is now the focus of all regeneration activity and involves substantial expenditure. Senior LEA staff are prominent in the work. Education is seen as vital to developing basic skills and raising aspirations. The LEA is also active in the Strategic Forum for Education and Training which has sponsored schemes with a significant bearing on attainment in school.

93. Concern about the health of Sandwell's young people is emphasised in reports from the Health Authority. The Sandwell Health Partnership provides the forum for debate and decisions on joint programmes. Practical steps have been

possible, for example, through the family projects and the school nursing service which the Health Authority commissions. School health programmes, referred to in Section 4, have been funded in large part by the Authority.

STATUTORY DUTIES

94. On the evidence available, the inspection judges that the LEA takes reasonable steps to fulfil its statutory duties and to assist schools to meet theirs. Complaints about the administration of education and actions by the LEA have been very few. However, there are three areas in which further action is required:

- While the LEA has sound procedures for reviewing school places, steps are needed, and are intended, to deal with the over-supply and uneven distribution of secondary places and to secure more efficient sixth form provision;
- The placement of permanently excluded pupils must be promptly pursued, and a routine analysis of fixed-term exclusions should be undertaken to establish patterns across schools;
- While the speed at which statements of special educational needs are processed has recently improved sharply, the rate of improvement needs to be maintained.

SECTION 4: THE MANAGEMENT OF SERVICES

- € *Schools find services generally helpful and expert but there are variations in response and inconsistencies in delivery which arise in part from inadequate specification, costing and evaluation, and understanding of cost-effectiveness is restricted. Co-ordination of services to schools has been notable in relation to schools in crisis; otherwise it has been limited, but is improving. The Directorate needs to devote more time to it.*
- € *The Advisory Service and its working practices are being rebuilt but there are gaps in its expertise particularly affecting secondary schools. The management and co-ordination of a complex range of curriculum projects and resource services and their links with other services are major issues which need to be addressed at a senior level. The new Curriculum Access Project needs review.*
- € *Services to support provision for special educational needs show effective management. The service on attendance suffers from inadequate documentation and monitoring and sometimes erratic delivery.*
- € *The structure of personnel services needs simplification. The service on finance is rightly working on aspects of its advice to schools on budget management. Property-related services have good systems but some frustrated customers. The service on information technology is more highly regarded for its work on administrative uses and technical support than for its work on curriculum uses. Governing bodies are well served by a small unit.*

95. The LEA provides most services to schools. The Advisory Service has in recent years given restricted coverage of subject and other training and consultancy, instead making arrangements with other agencies. Contracts for services subject to competitive tendering have been won by external contractors, with the LEA providing client-side advice to schools. Most services provided by the LEA were covered in the initial review but all were not covered in the same detail in the school visits.

96. LEA services demonstrate broad similarities in their management intentions and arrangements, reflects the fact that the Department achieved the Investors in People Award in March 1997. However, individual services have considerable autonomy. For example, they choose what approach to take up setting out a service description for schools. While they plan within the departmental framework, there is much variation in coverage, detail and costing and in the use of performance indicators. There is joint work by service teams, for example through school improvement projects and to assemble support for schools in difficulties. However, arrangements for routine communication between teams are based on the expectation that, in an LEA of this size and nature, intelligence about schools held by individual services will be pooled naturally and that useful action will arise from this. This expectation is only partly realised in practice.

97. The school survey presents the views of headteachers on services. A breakdown is given in Appendix 3. The picture is mixed, with a greater range in the responses than in most other LEAs surveyed. In summary:

- the overall rating in the survey on **advisory and curriculum support services** was in the range of adequate to poor – at the primary schools more satisfied than secondary. Support on literacy and numeracy came out rather better than for aspect of the curriculum. The LEA's own survey of the work of the Advisory Service, carried out at about the same time, produced a generally more positive picture.
- support to senior management was seen as adequate, again with more satisfaction in primary schools than secondary. Support on school planning and evaluation was regarded as adequate to poor, and the provision of performance data more highly regarded than guidance in its use. The LEA scored worse than other LEAs on how well it knows its schools.
- among the **other services to promote access and achievement**, the education psychology service was at the upper end of the range of the LEAs surveyed, being judged adequate to good, as were the learning support services, while support for pupils with behavioural difficulties was rated better than any other LEA surveyed, although still only adequate. The Education Welfare Service (EWS) was judged adequate to good.
- **management support services** were generally regarded as good or very good. Relative to other LEAs they score more highly than do most of Sandwell's other services, although there is variation among them.

98. On the evidence of the school visits, LEA services are widely regarded as responsive and sympathetic, very good on personal contact and usually good on problem-solving. Their staff are seen as energetic in their commitment to the service and the success of school, and invariably able to bring to bear particular expertise not available in those schools. These are strengths that it is important not to lose any reshaping of service organisation or practices. Nevertheless some common weaknesses need to be remedied if the quality of service delivery is to match schools' needs more consistently.

99. First of all, the basis on which services are provided is not clearly and systematically specified, costed and evaluated. There are exceptions, including most of the services subject to delegation. The LEA needs to extend the better practice among its services in this respect to the rest. Where the disciplines of specification, costing and evaluation are weak, staff and sometimes governors in schools can be uncertain about what they can expect and so are provided with a service at a different level than in other schools, when there is no rational basis for the difference. They can sometimes also waste energy in unnecessary negotiation, notwithstanding the helpful responses they invariably receive.

100. Many in schools, including new headteachers, would benefit from a clear, comprehensive manual which sets out the service provision and, thereafter, from a thorough and regular opportunity to review delivery. Providing these two things

should improve the debate about service deployment, use and value for money. There is not enough challenge by the schools, or by the LEA itself, about what services are provided, how they are provided and at what cost. Few, if any, schools have the information to make systematic judgements of value for money. Some schools look to use other agencies, particularly in relation to training, but many do not – and can rightly argue that, in most areas of service, they are not given the funding to exercise that discretion. Greater delegation of funding for services is one way of promoting better understanding of service value.

101. The second weakness concerns variations in the quality of service. While differences in views of services may reflect issues specific to the schools, they also highlight differences in the methods and effectiveness of individual staff assigned to schools. All services need to ensure that their management practices lead to more consistently good results across the LEA. There are problems in individual services which point to the need to improve management – and there are also signs in those same services that such problems are not deep-seated but are likely to respond to sharper disciplines. The level of funding for services is not the basic issue, although there are cases – for instance, building improvement and provision for bilingual learners – where there is not enough to go round.

102. The third point is the co-ordination of service action. This has not been a strong feature in the past. The exception has been when schools have been identified as in crisis, where the LEA has shown itself very capable of concerted action involving a number of services. Recent steps have been taken to improve co-ordination on a more routine basis.

- a standing school management support team has been set up to organise action on schools causing concern;
- collaboration on special educational needs has been improved, and a well co-ordinated approach is being taken to the creation of the LEA's behaviour support plan;
- the STEPS Project, described below, is designed to provide a co-ordinating framework for different school improvement projects;
- the merger of education and leisure is drawing together relevant activities, including the provision of study support facilities.

103. That such steps are needed was illustrated on the visits, for example, by the need to debate and reduce the overlaps between work by the CPS and the EWS, whose activities cover some of the same ground, and to make better connections between these activities and the work of link advisers. The Directorate is currently over-stretched and unable to give the close attention to the supervision of connections between services that is needed.

104. Finally, there is a point about the provision of written guidance. Sandwell services put a high premium on personal contact and staff and governors clearly appreciate this. For example, over an eight-month period EMU logged over 1800 visits to schools. However, efficiency is likely to be improved if more guidance is

documented in substantial form. An example is guidance on attendance, but there are other areas which could benefit from this approach. This would help the schools by consolidating advice in a neat and economic form. It would also help to rationalise workloads for services, most of which are being expected to do more with fewer staff than before.

ADVISORY AND CURRICULUM SUPPORT SERVICES

The Advisory Service

105. Headteachers and staff in the schools visited recognised the changes occurring in the staffing of the Advisory Service and knew that development was underway, for example on target-setting. However, despite improvements in the service, schools are not yet wholly convinced. There are continuing concerns in particular on two aspects of the coverage provided: the lack of senior secondary school management experience; and the patchy coverage of subject teaching, particularly, but not only, in secondary schools.

106. The staffing of the Advisory Service was run down from 1993 to seven advisers in 1995, but has been rebuilt over the past two years to 15 advisers (eight focusing on primary, six on secondary and one on special education, including special schools), two staff in the Assessment Unit, and the service manager. As the Advisory Service has grown back in size, the LEA has sought to appoint staff with experience for managing schools: this has been successful in the primary phase. A service review, which included a survey of headteachers and an external analysis, has led to proposals for some further expansion. Salary levels for advisers, which were among the lowest in the region, have been increased.

107. Other advisory support is extensive. 21 full-time project staff are currently funded by grants. Others are employed through the arrangement with the University College of St. Martin's, through the separate units on music and information technology, and on vocational projects, sports development and health education. The CPS also has significant training commitment. In addition, a school improvement team is being set up, using part-time secondments.

108. In short there is, on the basis of the current and planned establishments, no shortage of people available to provide support to Sandwell schools. Although the work of some advisory staff is constrained by the project regimes that fund them, the LEA manages the funding and deployment for virtually all advisory staff. Very little funding is delegated to school. The Advisory Service has been responsible, although not exclusively, for the range of curriculum projects. The way in which oversight, management and co-ordination of them – including the professional development of the staff involved, and the links with the work of advisers and with other services – are exercised within the Department is not entirely clear. There is a need to address this within the Directorate.

109. To an extent, the Advisory Service is a new service seeking more challenging ways of working with schools. It is now operating with clear and appropriate aims: to promote higher standards of attainment, particularly in relation to literacy and numeracy, and the more effective running of schools. The service monitors school

performance, provides advice and some training to headteachers, teachers (particularly newly qualified teachers) and governors, and assists in the recruitment of senior staff. As Section 5 indicates, there is evidence of effectiveness, sometimes considerable, in these tasks. There is also inconsistency in the way they are pursued and a difference in effectiveness in relation to primary and secondary schools.

110. Day-to-day management of advisers' work appears efficient. Each adviser acts as a link for a group of schools, with advisers working in pairs in the secondary phase. The agenda to which link advisers now work emphasises planning, target-setting and evaluation. The work of the advisers is monitored, but there is no formal review of the performance of individuals and the service as a whole that feeds into planning. The service has, on the other hand, developed procedures to determine the needs for support in its schools. Inspection reports are analysed. Information is gathered through visits, which usually lead to written records, although these are not yet produced in a fashion that lends itself readily to central retrieval. There are separate procedures for improvement projects and reports are analysed for their general conclusions.

111. Considerable time has been given to producing better systems to draw together analyses of information into target-setting for schools and planning for the LEA. The Assessment Unit has been a key to this development and link advisers are beginning to use the data systematically. The aim, being pursued through the STEPS Project, is a database of pupil-level attainment to track progress. A decision has been made on a common baseline assessment to scheme from September 1998. A scheme has been devised to use target-setting to focus efforts on specific improvements. Target-setting was underway during the inspection and is covered in Section 5. Most schools have set preliminary targets.

112. The information yielded from these activities is used as a basis for involvement in schools. In general, intervention in schools has been substantial in the past two years or so, with weak schools receiving most attention. There are concise policies for interventions in schools causing concern, including procedures to work through the improvements needed and for earmarking resources and training to back up intervention by advisers. The LEA has been taking a firm line on the changes in school management that it sees as essential to progress.

113. Much of the activity of advisers is built around OFSTED inspections. Schools choose from a menu of possible help before an inspection and some have exercised their choice so as to have only minimal help. There were examples in the schools visited of preparatory work having genuine, rather than cosmetic value. However, there were also schools where the pre-inspection analysis identified and reported problems, apparently for the first time, of such a fundamental nature that action to remedy them before the inspection was impossible.

114. The basis on which help is given after inspection varies. From the evidence of the inspection, the time allocated mostly accords with need, although the rationale was not always clear to the schools. There are now procedures for reviewing progress mid-way between inspections. Section 5 shows more evidence of practical help being given to primary schools after an inspection than to secondary schools, in part because the Advisory Service has been able to direct more project support to

them, and in part because of the extent of the primary phase management expertise now available in the service.

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115. The coverage of subjects by advisers presents a dilemma. Weaknesses in subjects across the board in Sandwell schools are shown by inspection data and there is much demand for external help. Although generic and project support, some with a subject focus, is welcome, headteachers and other staff in secondary schools in particular regret the absence of authoritative subject advice available from or arranged by the LEA. The level of activity that draws primary, secondary and special schools together on curriculum issues is low.

116. Given its size, the LEA does not expect to maintain a full team of specialist advisers. What schools can expect – and which they can contribute to – is a building up of other means of drawing in expertise, including through the use of in-school expertise and dissemination of materials from other agencies. Developments are in train with the recruitment of further advisers and part-time specialists, but how the new arrangements for coverage will work is not yet clarified. They would benefit from a clear audit and statement on what activities will be pursued and by whom.

School improvement projects

117. Since 1995 the LEA has made very substantial use of external funding, particularly City Challenge, the SRB and the National Literacy Project (NLP), to run projects aimed at raising standards in the schools.

118. The first of the projects, Raising Standards in Tipton Primary and High Schools ('the Tipton Challenge'), began in 1994, funded by City Challenge. It set out to raise attainment in literacy, numeracy and information technology in Key Stage 1 /2, to improve Key Stage 2/3 curricular liaison in these fields, and in Key Stage 4 to raise self-esteem and GCSE success.

119. Two SRB-funded projects, running from 1995, have been established to raise attainment in primary and secondary schools. The primary school project, Quality Start – Primary Standards, aims to improve basic skills, especially in language, in all primary schools, through training and work by advisory teachers. The Secondary Curriculum Support Project employs broadly the same methods but the focus negotiated with each school varies more widely both in scale and topic. SRB funding has been used for the Special Needs Curriculum Support Project, running from 1995, to develop science, modern languages and information technology in special schools and PRUs. An SRB-funded Curriculum Access Project (described later in this section) began in September 1997.

120. The grant-funded NLP, running from 1996, works with cohorts of primary schools on the basis of an audit of current practice and identifies and supports the necessary improvements through a teaching framework and by setting targets for improved attainment. A small-scale project based on the National Numeracy Project works in primary schools and a Key Stage 3 numeracy project began in January 1998. There are other projects on reading and mathematics in the context of special educational needs run by the CPS.

121. The most recent major project is STEPS, which aims to provide pupil-referenced data analysis for all Sandwell schools so that they can conduct self-evaluation and set targets for pupils' attainment. The project is intended to work in conjunction with other schemes.

122. Other projects with a bearing on school improvement have been run through the Education Business Partnership (EBP), including study skills and study support programmes, and with the Health Authority. In addition, there have been extensions of behaviour management training and wider implementation of a project on attendance, attainment and attitudes.

123. The pattern of these projects is complex, reflecting their different starting points, timescales, funding regimes, monitoring and evaluation arrangements and, in some cases, their different geographical coverage. There are also considerable overlaps. Because of the timescales involved the LEA has found itself bidding for funding for projects with only preliminary evidence of the effectiveness of approaches used in earlier ones – or, perhaps, without a clear idea of the needs of the schools likely to be covered. The LEA would have preferred not to establish its school improvement programme through such diverse means. It has been – necessarily, it would argue – opportunistic in looking for funding to support schools at a time when its own funding was reducing. It has sought to maximise the funding available and to target needs. It has maintained the principle, in most of the schemes, of using expert practitioners to focus on improving teaching through training and on-site classroom work. There is also a dimension of work with parents and with business in some projects.

124. The STEPS Project is designed to bring greater shape to the targets and operation of the other schemes – but it does not provide the whole answer. As Section 5 indicates, success in projects of these kinds depends on more than putting in more staff to work in schools. Clearer analysis is needed of the strategy in relation to teaching and learning, curriculum management and staff development, continuity through the key stages, and to sustaining development when projects end. More attention should be given to documentation and dissemination. In particular there is a need to spell out common approaches to classroom management and teaching and the implications of them for schools, including the implications for provision for special educational needs and for bilingual pupils. Without this level of attention there is a risk that individual activities, worthy as they are, will be uneconomic and their impact short-lived.

125. The point is demonstrated, for example, in relation to health education. This aspect of the curriculum has not suffered from any lack of commitment or funding (some £90,000 a year from various sources), or specialist coverage, or improvement

schemes employing imaginative methods. The overall effect of the work is, however, disappointing. The LEA's evidence is that some primary schools and a few secondary schools are taking health education very seriously, but it has a low priority for others. There does not appear to be a solid foundation for debate with schools and one on which particular programmes can build with the prospect that they will remain in one place. Of potential benefit would be comprehensive guidance on school policy on health promotion and on organising, teaching and resourcing health education, with the aim of consolidating and extending the examples of approaches recently produced.

126. The LEA's concern about the effectiveness of, and the relationships between, different projects is echoed in schools. The LEA's own evaluations, usually preliminary ones, show effectiveness to be mixed. For example, the effect of the Tipton Challenge Project in improving attainment was modest in the primary schools and weak in the two secondary schools concerned, but considerably stronger in relation to the involvement of parents of young children. The recently completed evaluation of Quality Start shows positive effects. The preliminary evaluation of the Secondary Curriculum Support Project showed appreciation of the training, but highlighted the consequences of the flexible approach taken to school involvement.

127. Most of the individual projects are well designed and usually have clear targets for improvement in attainment. They are also, on the evidence of the inspection, usually well staffed and well managed on a day-to-day basis. Their support is almost always welcome in the schools visited in the inspection, particularly because the arrangements are clear and adhered to and the training is of good quality. Quality Start, the NLP and the Special Needs Curriculum Support Project in particular received positive comment in the schools visited because they are well set-up, internally coherent and focus clearly on the improvement of teaching. However, as Section 5 shows, schools sometimes have difficulties in making the appropriate connections between elements of improvement work and in making the most of them.

The Curriculum Access Project

128. An exception in terms of project design and management is the Curriculum Access Project. This has two strands: curriculum enhancement and language enrichment for under-achieving pupils.

129. The Curriculum Enhancement Team (11 teachers) works in schools for short periods to develop aspects of the curriculum and improve access for under-achieving pupils. Its approach to under-achievement does not appear either distinct or well connected to other LEA work.

130. The Language Enrichment Team (45.5 full-time equivalent teachers and 6.5 nursery nurses) is currently working with approximately 1500 pupils in some 40 schools. The pupils include those with English as a mother tongue as well as those using English as an additional language. With this strand the LEA was seeking to fill a gap left by the ending in 1997 of the Section 11-funded Ethnic Minority Support Service, although discussion continued with the Home Office about a direct

replacement project. Meanwhile, staff from the Section 11 project transferred in the main to this one.

131. The arrangements for directing, supervising and developing the work are not well defined. How pupils are selected for support is being revisited, but plans for the future are confusing. The methodology includes devising individual learning plans (adding in most cases to individual education plans) and, apparently, using the former project's assessment scheme. The arrangements do not seem workable and in the schools visited they were, understandably, interpreted in a variety of ways. The teachers' work with pupils was invariably welcomed but there were differences, for example, in the numbers and nature of pupils supported and in the teaching approaches used. More advanced bilingual learners appear to have lost the support they had – though not in all schools. There were few signs that the staff were being used to brief and train others in some schools they were disconnected from developments highly relevant to their work.

132. Although it is early for the project, and work to develop it is in hand, a fundamental review is called for. Consideration should be given to focusing the remit of the language enrichment team on bilingual learners, passing over their management to individual schools, and to integrating the curriculum enhancement team with other curriculum services.

Other curriculum support services

133. The need for greater rigour in the analysis of service provision and its value is shown, in different ways, in relation to other curriculum support services – such as residential centres, referred to earlier. These support services have traditionally been valued by the Council, partly for their capacity to provide additional experiences for pupils from disadvantaged families. Reviews of most of these services are planned or underway. While the services provide useful contributions, reviews of them are desirable in the light of changing circumstances and to re-establish their rationale and funding basis. There is a need to make better connections with school improvement work – a point which also applies to support for curriculum uses of information technology.

134. With the number of schools buying into Resource Matters – Sandwell's **schools library service** – declining to 54%, the service has concentrated increasingly on meeting schools' immediate demands rather than on initiating new developments. It has the expertise to make a greater contribution than now and the current review offers the chance to establish it on a surer footing. At present the arrangements for evaluating the service are rudimentary: a serious lack, given that schools are increasingly reluctant, usually on financial grounds, to buy into it.

135. Suffering from contraction to a lesser degree is the **Sandwell Youth Music Service**. The service is partly funded centrally so that a basic allocation of time can be given to all schools. The service has improved its response to school needs and its support for the music curriculum. Schools can use both the basic allocation and additional time purchased for different purposes. The service is now delivered more equitably than it was, but, because of the system of charging at a school level, not all

pupils have equal access to tuition. The system for the evaluation of class music teaching provided by the service is also undeveloped.

136. The newer **sports development service** is in an apparently healthier position because of its central funding. The service seeks to build links between provision in schools and the community. It has expanded its capacity to advise schools by funding a team of school specialists released part-time to provide consultancy and training. There is routine monitoring by the service managers and for reports to the funding bodies. However, both the evaluation arrangements and the work of the service need to be drawn into the wider arena of school improvement activity.

OTHER SERVICES TO PROMOTE ACCESS AND ACHIEVEMENT

Services for special educational needs

137. Special needs administration and the services for hearing and visually impaired children, home and hospital tuition and pupil referral units are overseen by a Principal Officer. Day-to-day management of the teachers in the hearing impaired units lies with the respective primary and secondary headteachers. The quality of planning differs between the services, but the arrangements for the evaluation of their work are adequate.

138. The CPS includes support teachers for learning and behaviour difficulties and a team of education social workers. In addition to its assessment and support work, the service provides training and helps to target resources for special educational needs in mainstream schools through an audit system. It has played a leading role in several initiatives to raise standards and improve behaviour management.

139. The service is made up of six well staffed teams: 13 full-time equivalent (FTE) educational psychologists; 9.5 advisory teachers for pupils with learning difficulties; 5.5 advisory teachers for behavioural difficulties; three education social workers; four pre-school workers; 8.6 individual pupil support teachers. Deployment is based on the level of need established through measures of educational performance, by negotiation with schools and through the demands of servicing statements of special educational needs. Elements of the work are costly in relation to the numbers of pupils supported, although the teams also work with teachers, parents and others. The balance between the resources devoted to support of individual schools and pupils and those allocated to other activities was last considered some two years ago.

140. The service has gained accreditation of the quality of aspects of its management. The scope and quality of the service plans vary between the individual teams. Evaluation mechanisms include questionnaires to schools; the evaluation of particular projects is based in part on outcome targets. On the other hand, there is little detailed evaluation of the effectiveness of routine school work on basic skills with pupils with learning difficulties, to which the CPS and the Advisory Service might be expected to contribute.

141. Several of the LEA's services have recently been reviewed or, like the services for hearing impaired and visually impaired students, are now undergoing

review. In undertaking these reviews the LEA has mechanisms for consulting schools and responses have clearly influenced the outcomes – for example in the case of a review that led to re-establishment of the behaviour support service. During the inspection several schools questioned the rationale of locating this and other support services within CPS but inspectors found no evidence to suggest that this has a negative impact on the provision.

Education Welfare Service

142. The EWS defines enforcing attendance at school as its primary objective. However, the service plan does not indicate priorities, volumes and measurable targets for this aspect of its work. The service is well staffed, with 26 FTE Education Welfare Officers (EWOs). For budgetary reasons, 25% of posts were unfilled when vacant for the three years up to March 1997, producing discontinuity in the service to schools, but the service is now at full strength. Based on a sampling exercise, the service estimates that it comes into contact with 12% of the school population. The deployment of staff is appropriate and there are arrangements for their supervision and training, but management of the service is handicapped by limited administrative assistance and inadequate monitoring of casework and outcomes, which is being remedied as a result of a substantial Standards Fund grant for information technology.

143. The service makes a range of interventions to improve attendance. The emphasis is on flexibility. Schools are encouraged to refer to pupils about whose attendance they have concern and EWOs tailor action to the time available. Home visits play an important part, with an estimated average of some 50 a week for each school-based officer. Prosecutions of parents for failure to secure regular attendance at school run at a relatively high level; the service takes a robust view of the role of prosecution as, in some cases, an early rather than a last resort. Basic training on promoting attendance is provided for school staff and occasionally for governors but the major contribution to promoting good practice is through the routine contacts of officers with their schools.

144. Good use is made of school inspection reports and overall data to target attention to attendance in particular schools and evaluation has been undertaken of particular strategies within grant-funded projects, the use of sweeps and the use of prosecution. Two schools where intensive work was carried out within the Tipton Challenge project have shown high rates of improvement. However, the lack of a system for recording casework means that the service is not in a position to do much more than estimate the effectiveness of the approaches that are used more commonly. The service does not routinely disseminate analyses of attendance by area, age, gender, or ethnic group, or in relation to attainment.

145. Whereas most headteachers in the schools surveyed and visited are very satisfied with the work done, others complain of erratic working patterns and a lack of focused effort to bear down on poor attendance. On the evidence of the visits, there is much variation in the nature and the quality of support provided. Schools would be better helped to meet their responsibilities by, first, clearer specification of the criteria for referrals and the action that the EWS will normally take and, second, by more deliberate dissemination of effective school practice. There is no current

specification of the service provided. The attendance policy, a redraft of which was on hold in anticipation of a DfEE circular, is out-of-date and gives insufficient attention to improving school capability to promote attendance. Better connection and access to education would help. That the service is capable of more consistent delivery is amply demonstrated by the systematic approach taken in other areas of its work, such as child protection, the supervision of employment and youth justice.

MANAGEMENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Personnel

146. Support on personnel is shared between Personnel Services and Schools Management, with assistance from the Schools Support Branch. The allocation of work is not formalised, although particular staff deal with specific categories of employees and engagements with schools. Review of performance is in the main informal. The personnel service is not delegated to schools but service on payroll and pensions is, through a well-defined service agreement that attracts 100% buy-back from schools, where the service is well thought of.

147. The Department is considering a restructuring to deliver a seamless service to schools and to improve the efficiency of some aspects of the service. A restructuring is overdue. In the schools visited, the service is usually well regarded for administrative support and always highly regarded for advice on personnel casework and on the appointment of senior staff. However, as the service is demand-led and there is no definitive statement of entitlement, some headteachers and governors are plainly unsure about the nature and extent of the service available. Others argue, with justification, that the service should be more proactive in encouraging good personnel practice in schools. A single structure which covers both teaching and non-teaching staff would be a step towards this.

Finance

148. About 75% of funding for financial services is delegated to schools. The specification details the different levels of provision and what is expected from schools. Most schools buy the higher level of service. The service takes active steps to analyse budget issues and to disseminate information and carries out an annual customer survey. There are some areas where improvements are being sought, for example, the late close-down of annual accounts, difficulties with the use of information technology and the certification of invoices. The need for improvement in these areas was reflected in the visits to some schools, although most expressed considerable satisfaction with the service they receive, including its responsiveness to specific needs.

149. The efficiency of Sandwell schools has been criticised in inspection reports, not least because some have held large surpluses while having inadequate expenditure on learning resources and curriculum development. This inspection found that little attention had been given in the past to those schools running an unnecessarily large surplus or with major imbalances in expenditure. There has, however, been pertinent action with schools with budget deficits. Schools Financial

Services are currently engaged in a range of activities relevant to better school management of resources, including the provision of monthly financial monitoring and consideration of balances; the questioning of links with school development plans; the development of a scheme to enable active use of balances; and the provision of comparative financial data.

Property services

150. The services on building and grounds maintenance were rated about adequate in the school survey. The school visits, not unusually, illustrated much variation in satisfaction with issues on buildings. Some schools are well housed, sometimes after recent LEA action. Where there was dissatisfaction it generally arose from a view that the condition of some buildings had been neglected over a long period, despite often-reiterated plans for improvement.

151. Funding for building repair and maintenance (including those elements within the LEA's responsibility) was delegated from 1997/98, but schools agreed to purchase the service through a service charge. A working group of officers and headteachers considers asset management issues. There has been particular activity on security and on energy, where savings of 18% have been made over five years. Arrangements on risk assessment, reporting and follow up are fully covered in the LEA's health and safety policy. Inspections are carried out on a regular cycle and information and training are given on major matters and curriculum activities.

152. The service has well-documented systems on repair and maintenance. Planned schemes are prioritised from surveys and other sources and the use of a database is being developing further to aid planning. Contracts are let through competitive tender and monitoring procedures are extensive. However, in some schools visited, despite the quality of the documentation seen in the initial review, there was mystification about the way in which repair and maintenance worked and concern about the basics of service to customers. That other schools expressed much greater satisfaction – sometimes following action to specify more clearly what they expect – is an indication that these services respond differently in different schools and can improve their response when prompted.

153. Grounds maintenance is fully delegated to schools and almost all schools enter the LEA's contract. Schools are consulted on the specification and the arrangements for monitoring feature well-documented procedures for reporting and rectifying complaints. Overall the service is high cost in comparison to some other metropolitan districts, but the specification of work is also at a high level.

Information technology

154. Services on uses of information technology in schools are provided by EMU. The bulk of the costs of the service is delegated. Subscription by schools is high, with income exceeding the funding delegated by 20%. The service is delivered mainly through visits. Activities are reviewed and the support provided is well regarded by most in the schools visited, especially for administrative and technical support, but less so for curriculum support.

Support for governing bodies

155. The LEA has run an active campaign to recruit governors, including from minority ethnic communities. Of the required LEA appointments 13.5% are currently vacant. A support unit serves governors well on, for example, the formulation of draft agendas and the provision of written material. There are termly briefings for link governors and clerks. Training for governors includes on-site and evening courses, with other teams contributing. Schools make their own arrangements for clerking, with the LEA offering agenda items and supporting papers and officers attending meetings on request.

SECTION 5: SUPPORT FOR IMPROVEMENT IN STANDARDS, QUALITY AND MANAGEMENT IN SCHOOLS

IMPROVEMENT IN THE SCHOOLS VISITED

Primary schools

156. The inspection team made judgements about improvement in 22 primary schools since their OFSTED inspections. Seven of the schools had been identified by OFSTED inspections as having serious weaknesses; one was in need of special measures. Of the 22, seven (32%) had made good or very good progress, 11 (50%) had made satisfactory progress and four (18%) had made little progress. The greatest progress was usually being made by serious with the most to do.

157. The overall contribution of the LEA to improvements in standards, quality and management in primary schools was most cases satisfactory. Good or very good contributions were made in another four. Importantly, the LEA contribution was usually stronger in the schools with the clearest need for improvement.

158. Link advisers played a prominent role in improvement in a third of the schools and made other contributions, sometimes with colleagues, in other schools. Curriculum projects, particularly Quality Start and the NLP, played a significant role in improving teaching when, as was usually the case, they were well managed. Management support services helped with administration and, usually, with problem-solving. Contributions of special educational needs services were usually positive. Support on attendance was more variable.

159. The most potent contributions by the LEA were in linked sequence: the facilitation of retirements of headteachers in under-performing schools; advice on the appointment of a new headteacher; and subsequent support from the link adviser, sometimes intensive, on taking the school forward, including through well-focused support on one or more of the core subjects. There were also cases where improved accommodation had clearly made a considerable difference.

Secondary schools

160. Judgements of improvement were made in six secondary schools visited, two of which were judged by OFSTED inspections to have serious weaknesses. Of the six schools, four had made satisfactory or good improvement since their inspection; in the other two improvement was slow or modest. Two of the schools making satisfactory or good improvement were achieving better results at GCSE. There were improvements in the quality of the provision in all the schools, but only in three weeks were these substantial. The greatest improvement was in the management of schools: five of the eight schools visited had new headteachers and new structures and systems were taking effect. Planning arrangements were better in all but one school, with greater involvement in the part of middle managers, who, in most cases, were also clearer about expectations of them.

161. The overall LEA contribution was good or satisfactory in three of the secondary schools and limited or inadequate in the other three. The most important contribution across these schools (and in the two others to which a short visit was

made) was again the advice to governing bodies on the appointment of headteachers and deputy headteachers. Help in preparation for inspection was welcomed and was genuinely useful. The extent and quality of help with planning after an inspection varied considerably, from very good or good in three cases to poor in three others; monitoring of progress was light or non-existent. In one case, the quality of the advice on the action plan, the resources made available, the involvement of a range of services and the pertinent attention given to weaknesses was a model of partnership with the school – a partnership well managed by the headteacher. By contrast, the attention and help given to a school with, in fact, greater needs was in most respects inconsequential.

162. The contribution of link advisers was welcomed but was more notable for its supportiveness than for its incisiveness and breadth. Half of the eight schools had financial problems; action by well co-ordinated service teams had helped two schools to reduce deficits and plan ahead. In other cases the contributions of management services were adequate, although some significant problems with accommodation had not been remedied. The contributions of pupil services were patchy but sometimes good. Where curriculum support was provided it was usually through the Secondary Curriculum Support Project or EBP schemes and sometimes by individual advisers. This had benefits for teaching, on arrangements for monitoring and supporting pupils in Key Stage 4 and in relation to vocational developments. However, except in two schools, these contributions were too modest or inadequately co-ordinated to make a major difference.

Special schools

163. The three special schools visited were making good progress in aspects of curriculum provision and management. The LEA contribution was good overall, demonstrating appropriate action when it was called for. The Special Needs Curriculum Support Project was effective in the areas to which it applied, but the schools have very limited access to other subject expertise. The contribution made by pupil services was adequate, with the contribution of the EWS in one case highly effective. Good use was made of services provided through the Health Authority. Management support services contributed appropriately.

SUPPORT FOR EARLY YEARS PROVISION

€ ***The LEA has maintained a major investment in early years provision, including useful curriculum materials and projects. There is a need to build on the gains made in schools through projects and to consider cost-effectiveness.***

164. OFSTED inspection reports give generally favourable views of the progress made by children in nursery and reception classes, despite the fact that standards on entry are often low, and about the quality of the teaching.

165. The LEA sees clearly years education as an important investment and has given it particular attention, providing suitable adult/pupil ratios, maintaining curriculum support and setting up several initiatives. The commitment is continued in the LEA's current planning. A large proportion of three-year-old children now has the

option of a nursery place. The number of places provided by the private and voluntary sector is low. However, the Schools Committee has established an Early Years Development Partnership and a providers' consultative group. The Partnership has drawn up a reasonably comprehensive early years development plan that sets out the relationships and responsibilities of the providers and provides useful guidance on curriculum planning and assessment.

166. Over the past five years the LEA, through its Early Years Working Party, has produced or adopted worthwhile curriculum materials that are still being used effectively in schools. These included *A Quality Start*, which provides guidance on planning and curriculum organisation, and *A Flying Start*, which gives useful advice on planning for the national 'desirable outcomes for learning'. *A Flying Start* links productively to the Sandwell Early Years Profile. The majority of schools visited during the inspection make some use of this profile. Some schools found it over-complicated, but others use it very effectively not only as a baseline but to chart progress into reception. A decision has been made to use another type of baseline assessment in reception classes. Guidance will be needed on continuity between the two systems.

167. Several schools visited have been involved in at least one of the LEA's projects on raising attainment. These include the Parental Support Project, based in the six multi-agency centres, and the Early Starts Parental Support Project, based in three family education and training centres. Both projects have targeted the role of parents in developing children's social and literacy skills. Indications from project evaluations and the visits suggest that many children have benefited, settling into the routines of learning more quickly.

168. The Quality Start programme is having a significant impact on early years work in several schools visited. In one of the schools, reception class children were given an initial input from a visiting teacher using an approach similar to that pursued in the NLP. Pupils then undertook a challenging series of tasks. Many showed sound progress and achieved good standards in oral communication and literacy. There was also evidence that, by focusing on teachers' skills, this initiative has had impact on the teaching and learning in other subjects.

169. The greatest impact of the various LEA initiatives was in those schools where a clear focus and rationale had been discussed with the early years or link adviser, or where the headteacher had articulated objectives and planned for their achievement. There was less impact where the school had simply joined in because additional resources were available. Schools value the advice and support offered by the LEA on early years education but some feel that more support is needed in monitoring the impact of projects and in helping schools sustain improvements. None had considered the cost-effectiveness of LEA inputs.

170. Nevertheless, the LEA has demonstrated a significant and consistent commitment to early years education. It has supported schools effectively and promoted improvements by obtaining external funding for useful projects. In the case of the multi-agency centres, it has maintained the positive developments after the external funding was ceased. It now needs to build on the gains in this area, and to develop its own and the schools' awareness of cost-effectiveness.

SUPPORT FOR IMPROVEMENT IN LITERACY

€ ***After an uncertain beginning, work on literacy through the NLP has been effective in the schools involved. Although it has influenced work with other schools, the effectiveness of current support for them varies. Support in relation to secondary schools has been limited and there are unmet needs.***

171. Standards of literacy, judged by National Curriculum tests and results and results in GCSE English, are low. However, from their low base, these results have been improving faster than the national average.

172. Chief among the activities designed to develop the teaching of literacy is the NLP, in which the LEA has participated since 1996, but other projects and services also contribute. Aside from their routine work, the services within the CPS have contributed to programmes in literacy, for example through the ENABLE Project, which trains volunteers and non-teaching staff to work with children.

173. In the primary schools visited, the most effective direct support for literacy has been in those formally taking part in the NLP. The LEA's early management of the project was weakened by the fact that the adviser with overall responsibility had little time in which to carry out the work. The LEA's preliminary evaluation and HMI visits showed that there was also some resistance in the participating schools, particularly in Key Stage 2, in which the consultants had little expertise. More recent evidence is that the project is now much better received and is having considerable impact, with literacy now taught more effectively than it was. The LEA's analysis of National Curriculum and its own reading tests shows results in NLP schools improving faster than in other schools.

174. The NLP provides specific support in 40 schools, but Sandwell has extended NLP training to all its primary schools. With this background the LEA is well placed to pursue plans to implement the National Literacy Strategy. Involvement in the NLP has had a growing impact on the approach taken across Sandwell primary schools to the teaching of reading in particular, although there is more to be done in relation to the support provided in schools for teaching of pupils with special educational needs. In the schools visited that are not formally involved in the NLP, the effectiveness of current support varies. All the improvement projects involving work on literacy have produced some gains, but their effect on schools has been weakened in some cases by unsystematic identification of weaknesses and a lack of specificity in support. A general weakness has been a failure to set clear targets for improved attainment. In those schools visited that subscribed to Resource Matters, the quality of school libraries and their contribution to the teaching of literacy had improved. One school visited which did not subscribe had not given priority to improving a poor library.

175. Secondary schools have been introduced to more systematic teaching of literacy through a course about developments in primary schools involved in the NLP and about the National Literacy Strategy. The course has been successful in raising awareness, particularly amongst heads of English, but has not yet had much effect on practice. Other LEA improvement work in secondary schools, for example by the link advisers and the Curriculum Support Project and through work on GNVQ, has

helped to some degree but the specialist support available for English has been reduced to a low level. There are unmet needs as a result.

176. Overall, then, the LEA has done some effective work to improve the teaching of literacy, particularly in those primary schools directly involved in the NLP. In all but two of the schools visited, the LEA's work on improving standards of literacy has proved of satisfactory value. The value of the support would be improved by better analysis of needs, clearer definition of action to deal with them and better co-ordination of services and projects working in the field.

177. Standards in numeracy and mathematics in Sandwell schools are generally poor, but with significant variations between schools. The general trend is upward from a low base. Key Stage 1 results for 1997 showed improvement on the previous year greater than the national, while Key Stage 2 results showed a poorer rate of improvement. Key Stage 3 improved by more than the national rate. GCSE results are lower than the national average, with a worrying feature in some schools being the proportion of pupils not entered.

178. The variation in standards between schools was evident during the visits. Where standards for attainment were most depressed compared to national norms, pupils struggled, for example with basic number bonds and simple multiplication table facts at Key Stage 2. On the other hand, in one school where the mathematics co-ordinator was challenging teachers on their approaches to the subject Key Stage 1 pupils dealt with reversed number patterns. In the secondary schools at Key Stage 4, whilst the most able pupils could work comfortably with algebra and manipulate three-dimensional images, many pupils were still in difficulties with basic number work and had little confidence in using elementary mathematics in other subject areas.

179. The LEA recognises the need to tackle poor standards of numeracy and is working towards a practical strategy. A Numeracy Task Group was set up in July 1997 with the remit of identifying and disseminating best practice, particularly in relation to the National Numeracy Project, and providing a framework for a primary numeracy project. A cost-effective pilot scheme has recently been introduced in a small number of schools, with a team of advisers, a headteacher and co-ordinators attached to the schools. Progress will be monitored against objectives. In one school where the mathematics co-ordinator is involved in the pilot more rigorous teaching strategies have already been introduced.

180. Although most of the LEA's early externally-funded projects had as their main focus the development of literacy, some schools involved in Quality Start have chosen number skills as the priority to work on. They have been developing more focused teaching, often using short burst activities at the start of lessons. The quality of the work influenced by the project contrasted with some of the poorer lessons seen where pupils were allowed to work at a relatively relaxed pace through a work-scheme with little evidence of understanding.

181. In conjunction with the University College of St Martin's, the LEA has provided a ten-day course for co-ordinators on which the majority of schools have now been

represented. Teachers are positive about its effects. Another LEA initiative, ENABLE, will start in ten primary schools to use adult helpers on the improvement of mathematical skills.

182. Most of the schools visited are positive about the help available on issues such as classroom management but some feel there is a shortage of specialist support. Several were not aware of any specific mathematics expertise in the Advisory Service. Even in schools where the standards of numeracy were very poor it was unusual for the LEA to have been proactive, for example in suggesting a school policy on numeracy. There is, therefore, much more to do to raise the profile of work in this area and to pursue it systematically and with vigour.

SUPPORT FOR IMPROVEMENT IN DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY

€ ***Some initiatives to address poor standards in design and technology have been taken. Although the support available to primary schools has been small-scale and ad hoc, it has had benefits. Secondary and special schools need better access to authoritative advice and information.***

183. Inspection evidence shows that Sandwell schools have not sufficiently engaged in the development work necessary to teach design and technology effectively. Standards are well below national norms, with the gap between national and local standards being worse in this subject than in most others.

184. In response, the LEA has undertaken a number of initiatives, including: a ten-day course for primary co-ordinators, with some advisory follow-up, delivered in association with the University College of St. Martin's; the recent publication of primary subject guidelines, now disseminated to some 40% of primary schools; and advisory support to a small number of schools, delivered through training days or consultancy. Some teachers of design and technology have also been able to use SRB and EBP funding to gain specific support.

185. Support for design and technology has been modest in scale and *ad hoc* in availability. However, it has helped some schools and some teachers to improve their organisation and teaching of the subject and the standards attained. Meanwhile, some schools and teachers have forged ahead in developing the subject without much recourse to support from the LEA.

186. In two of the primary schools visited design and technology was particularly weak at the time of the inspections but has since developed considerably. In both of these schools, new subject co-ordinators have improved design and technology impressively, one with some support from the Advisory Service in the form of commentary on plans and contribution to training, and the other with considerable support through the co-ordinators' course, lesson observation, training, guidance on writing a scheme of work, developing teaching activities and obtaining appropriate resources. Coincidentally, in both schools, the link adviser is the 'point of reference' for the subject, and thus able to give specialist help. In two other schools where standard were mainly sound, this was particularly attributable to the clear orientation given to co-ordinators on the ten-day course. In a fifth school, where standards were

consistently sound, there was no evidence of LEA impact and the new guidelines were seen as insufficiently challenging.

187. While there is, some evidence of LEA impact, there are major shortfalls in the support for primary schools related to the lack of adequately resourced, specialist subject advice. They include: a lack of strategic planning for resourcing, training and curriculum development; a lack of oversight of the quality of teaching, management and post-inspection development which would enable the Advisory Service systematically to challenge those schools where standards are unacceptably low and to spread good practice; and a lack of opportunities for teachers to update their knowledge of national developments.

188. There is even less evidence of recent LEA support for this subject in secondary and special schools. There have been some instances of specialist adviser assistance, especially in relation to the food and textiles technologies, and some link adviser support for departmental management and in very specific ways by some external organisations and LEA projects.

189. Whilst the teaching seen in the schools visited was generally competent and some was good, there are clear deficiencies in the organisation and delivery of the subject and that the schools are finding very difficult to overcome given the lack of authoritative advice. These include: a continuing separation between home economics and CDT teachers which makes it difficult to plan coherent National Curriculum courses; the absence of a specialist who can challenge under-performing teachers or departments and can offer assistance, especially in product design, resistant materials, systems and industrial manufacturing techniques; and a lack of advice on resources and accommodation.

190. Where secondary schools benefit from LEA support, for example when SRB-funded and EBP projects are used as conduits to resources, skills and expertise, a few enthusiastic teachers have developed good teaching materials and methods. Some projects, such as the EMU Easter holiday 'Computer control in the Motor Industry' course, have been excellent in themselves but have had little long-term impact. More so than at primary level, secondary and special school teachers need better access to support if they are to raise standards in design and technology.

SUPPORT FOR IMPROVEMENT IN TEACHING

€ *Generally good improvement in the primary schools visited arose from the support through projects and co-ordinators' courses. Their use was generally well managed, but in some schools benefits were lost in part because important principles were not applied to other areas of the curriculum. Productive work in secondary schools was assisted, more modestly, by external support, which is generally too small in scale or inadequately co-ordinated. Improvement in teaching in the special schools was supported by specific, but limited, project attention. Approaches to staff development in schools need a boost.*

191. OFSTED inspection reports show that Sandwell primary schools have suffered significantly from weaknesses in teaching, including low expectations, limited subject knowledge and poor planning and organisation, particularly within Key Stage 2, and in the nature and use of assessment. The teaching of literacy and numeracy has had significant weaknesses. While much of the teaching in secondary schools has been judged generally sound, the nature and use of assessment have been frequently poor, and the systematic teaching of literacy and oral aspects of numeracy often weak. Arrangements for staff training have been judged poor in nearly half of primary and over a third of secondary schools.

192. In the **primary schools** visited improvements in teaching, including assessment, were generally good. The LEA contribution was always either satisfactory or good, achieving a higher rating than for other contributions. The greatest contributions were made through the Quality Start programme, which was or had been running effectively in 18 of the schools visited, and through the NLP, which was running effectively in eight. The projects sometimes worked in tandem. Other significant contributions in smaller numbers of schools were made by the ten-day courses for subject co-ordinators and in work on health education. Courses for and classroom visits to newly qualified teachers also had evident benefits, although the provision appeared to vary distinctly from school to school.

193. The benefits of these contributions derived in the main from the clarity of their objectives and arrangements; the receptiveness of the teachers involved; and the ability of the teacher or deputy to identify and support the key staff involved, to see the process through and to understand the wider implications of the work for teaching styles and curriculum organisation. Positive inputs included good training, both off-site for one or more teachers and on-site for staff; advice on resources and their use; and sustained classroom-based work by expert practitioners capable of working productively and efficiently with school staff.

194. The more pronounced these features, the more successful was the involvement of the school. In some cases the benefits of the involvement were reduced by overload, weak co-ordination and inadequate documentation. In a number of schools the returns on what are expensive involvements in projects were reduced by the fact that common principles arising from the work in particular fields were not derived or derived too slowly, or understood but not pursued. As a result,

the impact was localised when it could have been generalised, for example to development work in other subjects.

195. In most of the **secondary schools** visited considerable attention was being given to improvement in teaching and pupils' approach to learning. The issue is, rightly, high on the agenda. Some of the development work focused on pupils in Key Stage 4 preparing GCSE and on study support and other revision aids; it was insufficiently linked with other developments needed, including early in Key Stage 3. There was productive action on schemes of work, teaching approaches and assessment by a few departments in most schools, inspired by a new headteacher or head of department and, quite often, by an inspection.

196. Where support on the curriculum was provided it was usually through the Curriculum Support Project or EBP projects and sometimes by individual advisers; in other cases, but surprisingly few, schools went elsewhere for subject support. LEA-sponsored support had benefits for teaching, on arrangements for monitoring and supporting pupils in Key Stage 4 and, most consistently, in relation to GNVQ development. However, except in two schools, the projects lacked scale and intensity or were not adequately co-ordinated and so did not have the effect intended. Advice or materials occasionally missed the point by a wide margin because of a lack of understanding of the school's needs. In general, there is a lack of overall curriculum direction and guidance for secondary schools available from the LEA, and significant gaps in authoritative subject coverage, from any source, together with a lack of provision for middle management training. The schools themselves have not adequately filled these gaps, evident for some years – and, given that the LEA retains the funding for advisory services, expect the LEA to have done more.

197. While good use appeared to be made of professional development days in the primary and secondary schools, few schools in either phase had coherent, well-established staff development policies and their approach to staff appraisal specifically and to the monitoring of teaching quality more generally often seemed low-key. These are important features in any school, but particularly in those where staffing is stable and where staff are expected or need to take on new roles and approaches. In the context of an LEA drive to improve teaching it is worth noting that, in a one term sample of primary teaching posts carried out for the inspection, over half were advertised on the basis of temporary contracts.

198. Improvement in teaching in the special schools was good, with positive response to and effect from the Special Needs Curriculum Support Project in the subjects covered. The enthusiasm and expertise of the project staff had played an important role, though school staff themselves were also receptive and clear in their approach. They need more such opportunities. Staff development will be an essential concomitant of major changes in school designation or admissions.

SUPPORT FOR SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

€ ***Support for special educational needs reflects an improving picture, with some marked strengths and some areas of innovation, and positive relations between the schools and the LEA. There are, however, weaknesses, notably in the use made of funding for special educational needs in mainstream schools and the lack of clear specifications for generously funded enhanced learning provision.***

199. In general the LEA provides effectively for pupils' special educational needs, although the provision in mainstream schools is rated by OFSTED inspections better in primary than in secondary.

200. The LEA employs adequate numbers of appropriately qualified and experienced staff in its special schools and units and there is good peripatetic support available. Despite uncertainty over possible school closures, the special schools visited were positive about most aspects of the support they receive. The limitation in specialist curriculum support was the main exception, although this is now considered to be better.

201. The additional needs of pupils with statements in mainstream schools are funded directly by the LEA, taking account of the recommendations of the statements. The extent of support provided to these pupils through additional funding or from the various peripatetic support services is generally satisfactory. The support is considered expert and individual services is generally satisfactory. The support is considered expert and individual services make appropriate contributions. In most cases the support is provided on the basis of a clear understanding about the entitlement. Schools are almost always positive about the support, but they are generally not able to quantify the impact on pupils' attainments or to express a judgement about the value for money represented. Several schools rated the support provided by the services for hearing-impaired and visually impaired pupils particularly highly. This was also the case for the input of the CPS. There was a strong view that, aside from problems caused by staff changes, the CPS generally, and the educational psychologists in particular, provide good quality advice, support and training for schools. In several schools the training related to behaviour management was viewed very positively and its impact was obvious.

202. Those pupils whose needs are not great enough to warrant a statement are expected by the LEA to have their needs met through the schools resources, including an allocation related to the incidence of needs. In determining this additional resourcing the LEA has moved to a formula based on attainment data and a thorough analysis of the school's adherence to the Code of Practice, on the stages of which some useful criteria are provided.

203. The operation of this system has much to commend it. In general the schools visited feel that it is fairer, although, inevitably, some reported budget problems during the transition from the previous system. The process has the advantage of targeting resources to those schools with the greatest level of need. It has also encouraged greater consistency across the LEA in terms of the approximate level of educational need to be demonstrated by pupils placed on the various stages of the

Code of Practice. However, while schools have a broad understanding of the relationship between the level of need and the funds allocated, many schools have a poor understanding of the formula used and so cannot predict the amount they will receive.

204. A greater concern is that schools do not properly reflect their special educational needs allocation in decisions about spending, and cannot therefore demonstrate that it is actually used for the purpose intended. Staff and governors in several schools visited were vague about the basis on which the money is spent and in some cases even about the income involved. This is an issue of which the LEA is aware from a case study of schools and about which it is rightly taking action.

205. The LEA has been considering the implications of changes in the profile of special education needs across the borough for some time. The development of enhanced learning provision (ELP) is central to the new strategy. The 20 ELPs provide specialist provision in the context of a local mainstream school. The areas of need covered include moderate learning difficulties, emotional and behavioural difficulties, autism, speech and language and specific learning difficulties. The process of establishing the existing ELPs has been well managed in terms of ensuring a reasonable geographic spread. The schools themselves are positive about the initiative. Advantages already evident include reduced travelling times for some children and improved continuity or support arising from more secure contracts of employment.

206. However, at least some of the ELPs have been set up without detailed specifications to ensure effective use of the generous levels of funding provided. In one of the schools concerned, although there have been discussions with the LEA, there was little documentation about what the ELP is setting out to achieve and how, and no clear policy on the target population. In another school the written specification for the ELP did not establish clearly the needs to be met, the means by which they would be met or the basis for evaluation. In both cases substantial sums of money were being made available but with little guidance about how they were to be used. As a result some spending decisions had little direct bearing on the provision for pupils in the ELP. The LEA needs to establish a clearer understanding about its aims and rationale for admission to the ELPs and to give guidance on and monitor the use of funding to ensure clarity and accountability. This is a significant weakness in the application of the policy.

SUPPORT FOR IMPROVEMENT IN THE MANAGEMENT AND EFFICIENCY OF SCHOOLS

- € ***The LEA is giving very good assistance on the appointment of senior staff and other support for management has improved, especially in some under-performing schools. The work of link advisers is now proving more effective in primary but is less clearly useful in secondary schools. Other aspects of support are deficient: the LEA lacks a management development programme; more attention is needed to school planning; and while the use of performance data is developing, more consideration of its use in target-setting is needed. Support for governing bodies is generally good, but more direct communication with them on major developments affecting standards may be helpful.***

Support for management

207. OFSTED inspections of schools show that all schools inspected benefited from sound and often good routine administration and organisation, and working relationships amongst staff were usually at least sound. But key aspects of management, such as clarity of purpose, effective leadership, coherent planning and implementation of policies and reviewing of the school's work, were unsatisfactory in a large minority of primary and secondary schools. The quality of planning was deficient in over half of secondary schools, with resources poorly deployed and, frequently, with middle managers insufficiently involved in development planning or in monitoring performance in their areas of responsibility.

208. The LEA is working in a number of ways to help schools to improve their management. A basic element is assistance in the appointment, induction and support of new headteachers and deputy headteachers. Sandwell schools have generally had a low turnover of staff, including at the senior level. In the past two years retirements and movement have led to an unusually high number of headship vacancies: 21 in 1996/97. The LEA has facilitated some early retirements to make way for new appointments. In the schools visited, improved management has resulted from new appointments. This has been assisted by extensive induction courses for most appointees (although these have not led to a systematic analysis of training needs); significant contact with key officers covering a range of functions; substantial pre-inspection help and post-inspection action planning advice where appropriate; and the adaptation of projects to meet pressing needs.

209. The evidence of improved senior management is usually greatest in schools with serious weaknesses or needing special measures, where LEA intervention has usually been intensive. Set against this is the fact that about 15% of the schools visited had had major weaknesses in management of which the LEA was earlier either unaware or which it had been unable to remedy until and OFSTED inspection.

210. Headteachers report that LEA support to develop their management is now considerably better than it was, due partly to the strengthening of the Advisory Service. Advisers have made a discernible contribution in many schools. The better definition of the link adviser role and new appointments made to the role have made a distinct difference in relation to primary schools, but it is also clear that the role is

pursued with differing rigour. Where senior management has blindspots there are signs that these are not always adequately challenged or, possibly, identified. The inspection gave less evidence of the value of the link adviser role in relation to secondary schools, particularly in relation to the need for challenge and help when the school is finding improvement difficult.

211. This apart, deficiencies in the LEA's support to management remain and include: a lack of a systematic management development programme; a lack of courses, discussion opportunities and documentation which could provide cost-effective briefing, stimulus and debate on issues of widespread relevance; too little nurturing of deputy headteachers; too little training for middle managers to increase their capacity to contribute to school management; and the lack of a clear reference guide for all managers to LEA services.

212. Another area that needs attention is school planning, including evaluation of the school's work. There is a need for more thought in many schools visited about the approach used. The planning is almost always adequate but not often good. Common weaknesses are: the inadequate definition of what is to be done, particularly in secondary schools where it involves contributions from departments or other groups; poor or non-existent links between the intended action and improvement in attainment; incomplete or non-existent costing; and associated vagueness about monitoring arrangements. In a number of schools the link adviser had provided considerable help with the design of action plans, and less enough to render the plan more than reasonable. Systematic monitoring also appeared to be rear. Indeed, some headteachers indicated that school development plans and in some cases action plans, dutifully sent into the LEA, received no response at all. Better written guidance and exemplification and more discussion across schools of effective approaches to planning, including approaches to self-evaluation, is called for.

Use of performance data and target-setting

213. There is considerable variation between schools in the performance data collected and in the extent to which these are analysed and used to inform planning. The recent effort to shape, consolidate and extend schools' capacity to use data analysis, driven by the LEA's STEPS Project, is showing some signs of success, albeit unevenly, but it is too early to judge its impact. The first stage of the LEA-wide process of working with schools on target-setting was underway at the time of inspection. A review is planned at the end of the first stage and will be needed. It was clear from the visits that the preparatory debate about the principles and process of target-setting - including, for example, the difference between prediction and aspiration, the relationship with development planning, and the role of governing bodies - has been under-powered.

214. In those **primary schools** where data analysis and target-setting are developing satisfactorily, and the LEA is clearly helping, sound information has been well-analysed by the Assessment Unit into relevant fields, set against benchmarks; headteachers have been trained and are able to draw appropriate conclusions from the data and, in conjunction with advisers, to set challenging targets. Some schools have become adept in these matters without much LEA help. One, for example,

produces a detailed pupil profile to enable progress to be charted, though even in those schools where data analysis is more advanced, close consideration of the performance of pupils and year groups is rare.

215. More commonly, much needs to be done before primary schools' use of data and target-setting becomes an effective part of their planning. A few headteachers use and understand the techniques little, despite having similar access to data, training and advice as others. Some appear to have had too little training or discussion to meet their needs. As advisers vary their interventions, weaknesses are not being dealt with rigorously enough. However, in the main, the impact of the advisers in this new area is showing signs of effectiveness.

216. For **secondary schools**, the Assessment Unit has provided performance data and an impetus towards target-setting but the approach to their use has been less proactive and systematic than in primary schools. Some schools are ahead of the LEA in monitoring performance and setting targets, often through the use of externally-provided systems. Others use data poorly or with inconsistency between departments. Although the data provided by the LEA is generally seen as valuable, some headteachers are concerned, for example, by the lack of account taken of pupils' past performance.

217. The position in **special schools** is made complex by the wide range of capabilities for which they provide. In this context, the advisers have helped schools to formulate targets but, as elsewhere, there is a lack of clarity about how target-setting relates to different learning difficulties.

Support for governing bodies

217. OFSTED inspections show the quality of governance in Sandwell's schools to vary from the strong and effective to the well-meaning but ineffectual, with some governing bodies leaving many of their responsibilities to headteachers. Within this range, most governing bodies need to be more active in setting policies on raising attainment and monitoring their implementation. The visits indicated that in some schools with such deficiencies at the time of OFSTED inspections, governors have responded positively and, helped in some cases by courses and advice from the LEA, have improved their approach.

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219. The LEA's governor support unit provides an extensive range of courses, as well as advice and information services, and governors in most schools visited rated

their quality very highly. For instance the LEA has provided recent training for representatives from almost every governing body on their role in evaluating school performance. Nevertheless, although the LEA does what can reasonably be expected to publicise the courses, their take-up has generally been limited. Despite this, governors believe that they are informed well by the LEA, although few were aware, for example, of the current policy on setting targets and there were other gaps in knowledge about major developments. On this evidence, it would be appropriate for the LEA to consider more direct communication – through governing body agendas or otherwise – about such developments.

220. As indicated in the school survey and interviews with governors, the LEA is seen as supporting governing bodies and there is good evidence of its support. Assistance in the appointment of headteachers and deputies is authoritative and highly valued. Recently, a number of such posts have been filled and the Lea has been strenuous in its efforts to help governors to select appropriate candidates, even though fields have often been modest in size. In the relatively high number of appointments made recently, more external candidates have been appointed than has usually been the case, although the trend of appointing internally in primary schools continues.

221. There were some criticisms by governors of the LEA's failure or slowness to secure funding for the improvement of buildings. Whilst this reflects a natural rationing of funds for such projects, other criticisms – about the late provision of information on finance and admissions – are more easily remedied. Governors rate advisers' help before OFSTED inspections highly. However, support after inspections to help governors understand the judgements and draw up action plans has ranged from the very useful to the disappointing.

APPENDIX 1: THE CONTEXT OF THE LEA

Characteristics of the pupil population

Indicator	Date	Source	LEA	National
1. Number of pupils in LEA area of Compulsory school age	1997	LEA	45784	-
2. Percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals				
(i) primary	1997	DfEE	30.9	22.8
(ii) secondary	1997	DfEE	25.0	18.2
3. Percentage of pupils living in households with parents/carers				
(i) with Higher Educational qualifications	1991	Census	4.9	13.5
(ii) in Social Class 1 and 2	1991	Census	14.4	31.0
4. Ethnic Minorities in population aged 5-15. Percentage of ethnic group:	1991	Census		
Asian			0.3	0.5
Bangladesh			2.0	0.8
Black African			0.1	0.6
Black Caribbean			3.0	1.1
Black Other			1.3	0.8
Chinese			0.1	0.4
Indian			13.9	2.7
Other			1.1	1.1
Pakistani			4.6	2.1
White			73.7	89.9
5. Percentage of pupils				
(i) with a statement of SEN				
primary	1997	DfEE	2.2	2.6
secondary	1997	DfEE	3.1	3.9
(ii) attending special school				
primary	1997	DfEE	1.5	1.1
secondary	1997	DfEE	2.5	2.0
6. Participation in education:				
(i) % pupils under 5 on the roll of a maintained school	1997	Audit	99.0	60
(ii) % pupils aged 16 remaining in full-time education	1996	DfEE	56.0	69.7

Organisation of schools

Types of school

Nursery schools	2
Infant schools	18
Junior schools	16
Junior and Infant schools	73
Middle schools	0
Secondary schools 11-16	13
11-18	7
Special schools	11
Pupil Referral Units	5

Surplus places

% surplus	Year	LEA	National
Primary	1997	- 4%	+ 10.0
Secondary	1997	+12%	+ 16.7

Source: Audit Commission

Pupil/teacher ration

	Year	LEA	National
All	1997	19.9	19.6
Nursery	1997	16.7	19.2
Primary	1997	23.9	23.0
Secondary	1997	16.3	16.2
Special	1997	7.3	6.2

Source: DfEE

Class size

Rate per 1000 classes

Size of class	Year	LEA	National
31 or more - KS1	1997	387.3	289.6
- KS2	1997	482.2	379.0
36 or more - KS1	1997	16.9	22.9
- KS2	1997	19.5	35.0

Source: DfEE

Finance

Indicator	Source	Year	LEA	National
% expenditure in relation to standard spending assessment	DfEE	1997/98	102.6	-
Funding per pupil:	CIPFA	1996/97		
£ per pupil Primary 0-4			991.1	1278.8
5-6			1150.7	1180.2
7-10			1055.1	1149.4
£ per pupil Secondary 11-13	CIPFA	1996/97	1506.7	1567.4
14-15			1793.8	1931.4
16+			2117.6	2440.0
Aggregated schools budget:	CIPFA	1996/97		
£ per pupil Primary			1492.6	1486.0
Secondary			2077.4	2052.7
Special			7313.2	7945.2
General schools budget:	CIPFA	1996/97		
£ per pupil Primary			2011.1	2021.8
Secondary			2658.4	2694.2
Special			10883.7	12595.0
Potential schools budget:	CIPFA	1996/97		
Primary			1669.2	1664.6
Secondary			2331.3	2232.6
Special			8357.1	8819.1
Capital expenditure:	CIPFA	1996/97		
£ per pupil			71.4	128.9

APPENDIX 2: THE PERFORMANCE OF SCHOOLS

The analysis draws on data provided by the LEA, the DfEE and OFSTED. Figures for maintained schools are compared with national averages and, where available, the average for the LEA's statistical neighbours – i.e. those LEAs which are closest to Sandwell on socio-economic and other data.

Attainment at age 7: Key Stage 1 tests/tasks

	Year	% of pupils achieving Level 2 or above					
		Teacher Assessment			Tasks/tests		
		LEA	National	Difference	LEA	National	Difference
English	1996	72.5	79.3	- 6.8	-	-	-
	1997	73.6	80.4	- 6.9	-	-	-
English (reading)	1996	72.3	78.6	- 6.2	71.2	78.0	- 6.8
	1997	73.0	80.1	- 7.1	72.8	80.1	- 7.3
English (writing)	1996	69.0	76.6	- 7.6	73.0	79.7	- 6.8
	1997	69.5	77.5	- 8.0	72.0	80.4	- 8.4
Mathematics	1996	74.3	82.2	- 7.9	74.5	82.1	- 7.3
	1997	79.1	84.2	- 5.0	79.3	83.7	- 4.5
Science	1996	75.2	84.1	- 8.9	-	-	-
	1997	77.2	85.5	- 8.4	-	-	-

Attainment at age 11: Key Stage 2 tests/tasks

	Year	% of pupils achieving Level 2 or above					
		Teacher Assessment			Tasks/tests		
		LEA	National	Difference	LEA	National	Difference
English	1996	49.9	60.1	- 10.2	44.7	57.1	- 12.4
	1997	53.5	63.4	- 9.9	52.3	63.2	- 11.0
Mathematics	1996	48.3	59.9	- 11.5	38.7	53.9	- 15.2
	1997	50.9	64.1	- 13.2	46.2	62.0	- 15.8
Science	1996	51.4	65.1	- 13.7	45.0	62.0	- 17.0
	1997	55.3	69.5	- 14.2	51.7	68.8	- 17.1

Attainment at age 14: Key Stage 3 tests/tasks

	Year	% of pupils achieving Level 5 or above					
		Teacher Assessment			Tasks/tests		
		LEA	National	Difference	LEA	National	Difference
English	1996	47.7	60.3	- 12.6	42.7	56.6	- 13.8
	1997	48.7	60.2	- 11.5	47.8	56.6	- 8.8
Mathematics	1996	46.1	61.5	- 15.5	41.2	56.7	- 15.6
	1997	48.4	64.0	- 15.6	46.8	60.7	- 13.9
Science	1996	46.5	59.7	- 13.2	41.3	56.4	- 15.2
	1997	46.9	62.2	- 15.3	45.0	60.8	- 15.8

Key Stage 4: GCSE Results

Level achieved	Year	LEA	National	Difference
1 A*-G	1995	90.6	93.5	-3.0
	1996	91.0	93.9	-2.9
	1997	89.5	94.0	-4.9
5 A*-C	1995	27.4	41.2	-13.8
	1996	27.2	42.6	-15.4
	1997	27.5	43.3	-6.5
5 A*-G	1995	81.8	87.5	-5.7
	1996	83.4	88.1	-4.6
	1997	82.0	88.5	-6.5

Pupils aged 15 at the beginning of school year and on roll in January of that year

Key Stage 4: Vocational Qualifications

Level achieved	Year	LEA	National	Difference
Pass Entries	1994	89.3	87.9	1.3
Pass Entries	1995	95.2	85.3	9.9
Pass Entries	1996	55.5	79.2	-23.6
Pass Entries	1997	85.2	80.1	5.1

Attainment at age 18: A level results – average point score per pupil

Number entered	Year	LEA	National	Difference
2 or more	1995	13.0	15.9	-3.0
	1996	12.3	16.8	-4.4
	1997	11.5	17.1	-5.6
Less than 2	1995	2.5	2.7	-0.2
	1996	2.1	2.7	-0.6
	1997	2.1	2.7	-0.6

Vocational qualifications of 16-18 year olds

Level achieved	Year	LEA	National	Difference
Pass entries	1995	80.3	80.2	0.1
Pass entries (Advanced)	1996	73.3	79.3	-6.1
	1997	73.8	75.4	-1.6
Pass entries (intermediate)	1996	76.9	69.1	7.8
	1997	65.7	68.9	-3.3

The percentage of students who were in the final year of a course leading to approved vocational qualifications who achieved them on the basis of the work done in that year.

ATTENDANCE

	Year	LEA	National	Difference
Attendance in primary schools	1996	91.2	93.4	-2.2
	1997	92.2	93.9	-1.7
Attendance in secondary schools	1996	87.5	90.5	-3.0
	1997	88.4	90.9	-2.4

EVIDENCE FROM INSPECTIONS

Inspection data on Sandwell

Aspect		Very Good Schools	Good Schools	Schools Requiring Some Improvement	Schools Requiring Much Improvement
Standards of Achievement	LEA	0	37	52	11
	Statistical Neighbours	8	35	44	13
	National	12	42	40	7
Quality of Education	LEA	7	33	39	22
	Statistical Neighbours	12	41	34	13
	National	15	42	34	10
Ethos	LEA	23	48	27	2
	Statistical Neighbours	35	47	14	5
	National	50	38	9	2
Efficiency	LEA	13	35	35	17
	Statistical Neighbours	24	38	24	14
	National	27	37	27	10
Overall	LEA	2	44	47	7
	Statistical Neighbours	9	51	33	7
	National	15	55	27	3

Inspection data on Sandwell secondary schools

Aspect		Very Good Schools	Good Schools	Schools Requiring Some Improvement	Schools Requiring Much Improvement
Standards of Achievement	LEA	0	38	31	31
	Statistical Neighbours	11	33	44	11
	National	23	39	30	9
Quality of Education	LEA	6	29	65	0
	Statistical Neighbours	7	55	36	3
	National	17	51	26	6
Ethos	LEA	25	44	31	0
	Statistical Neighbours	26	36	30	8
	National	41	35	17	6
Efficiency	LEA	12	35	24	29
	Statistical Neighbours	24	40	24	13
	National	30	38	21	11
Overall	LEA	6	25	69	0
	Statistical Neighbours	6	49	38	7
	National	20	49	26	5

APPENDIX 3: THE SCHOOL SURVEY

The survey was sent to 90 schools in the LEA and the response rate was 86%.
The graph summarises the results. It shows:

- an average score for all schools surveyed in the LEA, on a 1-5 scale, where 1= Very good; 2 = Good; 3 = Adequate; 4 = Poor; 5 = Very Poor;
- the average score for all schools in the 18 LEAs surveyed, indicated by the black dot;
- the highest average score (shown by the triangle) and the lowest average score (shown by the square) for all LEAs;
- by the shading of the bar, whether the LEA score is significantly different ($P < 1\%$), either higher or lower, from the other LEAs.