

Inspection report
SWINDON
Local Education Authority

Date of inspection: June 2003

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Basic information about the LEA

Name of LEA:	Swindon Local Education Authority
Address of LEA:	Sanford House Sanford Street Swindon SN1 1QH
Lead inspector:	Christine Brown
Date of inspection:	June 2003

Introduction

1. This inspection of Swindon local education authority (LEA) was carried out by Ofsted in conjunction with the Audit Commission under section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The inspection used the *Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities* (December 2001) which focuses on the effectiveness of LEA's work to support school improvement. The inspection also took account of the Local Government Act 1999, insofar as it relates to work undertaken by the LEA on Best Value.
2. A report of the previous inspection was published in September 2001. Following this inspection, the Secretary of State for Education and Skills directed the chief executive of Swindon Borough Council to secure the LEA's functions regarding the education of school-age children by entering into a three-year contract with a strategic partner, and by the establishment of an education partnership board. This inspection, therefore, focused on the work of the partnership in discharging the LEA's functions regarding the provision of education to school-aged children.
3. The inspection was based partly on data, some of which was provided by the LEA and on school inspection information and audit reports, on documentation and discussions with elected members, staff in the LEA client team and the education partnership board and in other council departments. Use was also made of the self-evaluation conducted by the LEA. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on aspects of the LEA's work was made available to all its schools in November 2002, and its results were considered by the inspection team. The response rate was 63 per cent.
4. Group discussions were held with representatives of schools, the LEA's partners, and community representatives. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through case studies and telephone interviews. The inspection also took account of relevant evidence from Her Majesty's Inspectors' national monitoring work.
5. An inspection team makes up to 52 judgements covering the inspected functions of the LEA. The criteria (and the accompanying guidance notes) against which judgements are made can be found on the Ofsted website. The numerical grades awarded for the judgements made in this inspection are appended to this report, along with short explanations of what each numerical grade represents. Judgements made during the inspection indicate the effectiveness of the LEA's performance of individual functions at the time of the inspection. The numerical grades must be considered alongside the comments on the individual functions within the report.
6. Some of the grades are used in the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) profile for the education service. It is intended that the CPA for education will be updated annually so that the grades from this inspection will contribute to the next assessment.
7. The CPA profile for the education service takes account of the performance of several aspects of the local service, including pre-school and adult education. The CPA profile for education is composed of a number of inspection judgements, as well as other

performance indicators, such as improvement trends at Key Stage 3. The assessment, published in December 2002, gives star ratings for each local authority for a range of local services, for example social services, benefits, environment, whereas this report focuses on the local authority's work to support school improvement.

Commentary

8. Swindon continues to have one of the fastest growing populations in the country. The economy is buoyant and unemployment levels are below the national average. Despite this, the borough has pockets of severe deprivation.

9. Standards are average in all core subjects and across all key stages, except in mathematics at Key Stage 2 and in the proportion of pupils achieving one or more A*-G grades in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), which are below national averages. The progress that pupils make and the rates of improvement are uneven. There is wide variation in the performance of individual schools, and underachievement by boys and some minority ethnic groups.

10. At the time of the previous inspection, in June 2001, the overall performance of the LEA was very poor. At the direction of the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, the council has appointed a strategic partner and an education partnership board to ensure effective provision of education services. This partnership has been successful in providing the council with clear advice and guidance in areas for which it is responsible, ensuring that a range of partners are involved in shaping policy and strategy and producing a creditable strategic plan for education. The council has made a significant investment in education. Schools welcome the increased pace of developments and the calibre, expertise and determination of the new leadership team for education. They are cautiously optimistic about immediate future development, while recognising that it is too early to see the sustained effect of recent changes.

11. Most functions are now performed satisfactorily, with around a sixth improving from a very low base. There has been significant progress in developing a policy and strategy for special educational needs (SEN) and inclusion and a sharp reduction in the number of pupils permanently excluded from secondary schools, reversing an earlier rising trend. Good progress has been made in the planning of school places and surplus places in primary schools are being tackled. There is improved transparency in the process of categorising schools according to their needs and the number of schools requiring special measures or with serious weaknesses has decreased. A new contractor has recently been appointed to develop and manage a brokerage service for schools. The council continues to fulfil its role as a corporate parent and support for looked after children is now very good. The LEA has a good range of data, but the analysis and application of data are underdeveloped, especially at the level of individual services. The legacy of weak management and under-investment is still reflected in unsatisfactory asset management planning, although there are some signs of early improvement.

12. There are still weaknesses at the corporate level but, because of current partnership arrangements, these have not constrained progress within the education department. Officers, elected members and schools lack a common understanding of the council's priorities and, within these, the part played by education. Corporate planning is unsatisfactory and procedures for democratic scrutiny are weak. Schools have limited faith in the council's ability to make appropriate decisions without the additional security afforded by the present contractual arrangements.

13. Several functions, carried out well at the time of the last inspection, continue to be effective and were not re-inspected. These are:

- support for literacy;
- support for governors; and
- provision of financial services.

14. Of the functions inspected, the LEA now also discharges the following particularly effectively:

- support for numeracy;
- support for attendance; and
- support for looked after children

15. The following are unsatisfactory:

- the clarity and coherence of corporate plans and their implementation;
- asset management planning; and
- strategic planning of services to support school improvement.

16. Support for information and communication technology (ICT) in the primary curriculum and property services are poor.

17. Current contractual arrangements and the strategy for intervention have secured the sustained focus on education needed to accelerate progress. The strategic partner and the independent chair of the partnership board have brought expertise and qualities that have helped establish the credibility of the partnership. The education partnership board has a clear view of its strategic role and has been instrumental in improving the quality and speed of decision making. The combination of the new leadership team for education, the strategic partnership, the clear direction provided by the education partnership board and the accuracy and realism of the LEA's self-assessment provides evidence of the strong potential for further improvement.

18. The findings of this inspection accord broadly with the Comprehensive Performance Assessment for education published in December 2002, although the improvements secured by the intervention strategy indicate a stronger position for its capacity to improve. With the support of a strategic partner and an education partnership board, the effectiveness of the LEA is now satisfactory. The LEA has made highly satisfactory progress since the last inspection two years ago. It has sufficient capacity to improve further within the current contractual arrangements. However, progress beyond that point is uncertain and is constrained by the council's effectiveness in planning, implementing and evaluating corporate plans. Progress will depend upon building the council's capacity, not only to gain the trust and confidence of schools, but also to demonstrate strong and effective corporate decision making that supports all elected members in understanding educational issues. There have been many recent and significant changes in the council and the education department, but it is too early to assess the impact of most of them. Early indications are promising but a further inspection will be needed before the end of the present contract.

Section 1: The LEA's strategy for school improvement

Context

19. Swindon continues to have one of the fastest growing populations in the country; since the 1950s the population has doubled compared with around a 20 per cent increase nationally. The socio-economic context of the borough remains similar to the position at the time of the first inspection. Swindon has a buoyant economy and ranks about average on socio-economic indicators. However, two of the 59 wards rank among the most disadvantaged nationally.

20. The school population is approximately 29, 000 pupils. The authority maintains 66 primary schools, ten secondary schools, six special schools and one pupil referral unit. Two secondary schools have sixth forms and there are 13 nursery units within primary schools. There is one foundation, seven voluntary aided and three voluntary controlled primary schools, and one voluntary aided, three foundation and six community secondary schools. Twenty-one schools have additional resourced provision for special educational needs.

21. Around seven per cent of the school population is from a minority ethnic group, a proportion well below the national average (12 per cent). Some 13 per cent of primary and ten per cent of secondary pupils were eligible for free school meals in 2002. These figures are below the national average for primary aged pupils (21 per cent) and below the national average for secondary aged pupils (16 per cent).

22. In 2002, the proportion of primary-aged pupils with statements of special educational needs was in line with the national average (2.5 per cent compared with 2.6 per cent nationally). For secondary-aged pupils, the proportion of pupils with statements (5.5 per cent) is well above the national average (4.1 per cent). The proportion of primary-aged pupils educated in special schools (1.2 per cent) in 2002 was in line with the national average (one per cent), while for secondary-aged pupils, the proportion educated in special schools (3.6 per cent) was well above the national average (1.8 per cent).

Performance

23. Attainment of pupils on entry to primary schools is in line with the national average. For the percentage of pupils achieving Level 2 and above, attainment at the end of Key Stage 1 in reading, writing and mathematics is in line with the national average. Attainment in writing is broadly in line with the average for similar LEAs¹, but it is below the average for reading and mathematics. The rate of improvement in reading, writing and mathematics is broadly in line with the national trend.

¹ The borough's closest statistical neighbours are: Telford and Wrekin, City of Peterborough, Torbay, Isle of Wight, Poole, Medway, Northamptonshire, Warrington, York, South Gloucestershire.

24. At the end of Key Stage 2, the percentages of pupils achieving Level 4 and above are broadly in line with the national averages and the averages in similar LEAs for English and science but below for mathematics. The rate of improvement is in line with the national trend for English and science but below for mathematics.

25. The percentages of pupils achieving Level 5 and above in English, mathematics and science at Key Stage 3 are broadly in line with the national averages and averages in similar LEAs. The rate of improvement is broadly in line with the national trend in English, below in science and well below in mathematics.

26. At the end of Key Stage 4, the percentages of pupils achieving five or more A*-C grades at GCSE, and the average point score at GCSE, are broadly in line with national averages and the averages in similar LEAs. The percentage of pupils achieving one or more A*-G grades at GCSE is below the national average and well below the average in similar LEAs. The rates of improvement at GCSE are well below the national trends.

27. Pupils make sound progress at Key Stage 1. The rate of progress between Key Stages 2 and 3 is above the national average. However, the progress of pupils between Key Stages 1 and 2, and between Key Stages 3 and 4, is well below the average rate.

28. There is some underachievement by boys, especially those of Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean and Black African heritage. There is also wide variation in the performance of schools. Data from Ofsted inspections indicate that there are fewer good and very good schools and more schools needing improvement compared with the national average and the average in similar LEAs, although inspections within the last year show clear improvement. One secondary school and one primary school are currently in special measures and two primary schools and one secondary school have been designated as having serious weaknesses. Two primary schools are underachieving. One primary school has Beacon status. Three secondary schools have specialist status.

29. Attendance is in line with national averages in both primary and secondary schools. Unauthorised absence is below the national average in primary schools and in line with the national average in secondary schools. The rate of permanent exclusion is below the national average for primary schools; for secondary schools, it is broadly in line with the national average.

Council structure

30. Since May 2000, no political party has had an overall majority. Following the elections in May 2003, the balance and composition of elected members changed. The council comprises 59 elected members: 29 Conservative, 22 Labour and eight Liberal Democrats. There is still no party in overall control of the council, and the Conservative group holds the leadership.

31. The council moved to full implementation of the modernised democratic arrangements in May 2002. The structure includes a cabinet, made up of the leader and deputy leader, up to eight portfolio holders and three policy development commissions. In addition, a scrutiny commission monitors and assesses the performance of the cabinet and the

council as a whole. A scrutiny education task group, a sub-group of the scrutiny commission, scrutinises the work in education.

32. Following the poor grading at the time of the previous inspection, a direction from the Secretary of State for Education and Skills determined that formal intervention strategies were necessary. In the first instance, officers from two neighbouring LEAs were seconded for two terms to oversee the production of the Education Development Plan (EDP) and to support the categorisation of schools and aspects of special educational needs. In May 2002, the council and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) appointed a strategic partner to ensure effective provision of education services. The resultant contractual arrangements are set to run until August 2005. The agreement also required the establishment of an education partnership board to ensure improvement in the strategic direction of the LEA, to guarantee the involvement of stakeholders at a suitable strategic level, to enable open and transparent scrutiny of the council's priorities, and to rebuild the relationships between schools and the LEA. Clear protocols and procedures have been established for partnership working between the council, the strategic partner and the education partnership board.

33. The education partnership board includes a wide representation of educational stakeholders, including councillors from all three political parties, headteachers, governors, the Learning and Skills Council, the diocesan authorities and the professional associations. The board has an independent chair, appointed jointly by the council and the Department for Education and Skills. The board is the key body driving change by acting as the principal advisory body to the council, mainly via the cabinet, on the courses of action to be taken. The cabinet has a forward plan to enable effective decision making, including regular reports from the education partnership board. In addition, the weekly meeting of the team of directors includes a standing item on reports requiring a corporate overview.

34. An education contract monitoring meeting takes place every month comprising the council, the strategic partner, the education department and the Department for Education and Skills. Education performance is reviewed by the team of directors, the cabinet and the scrutiny education task group.

35. The acting chief executive was appointed to the substantive post just prior to this inspection. The chief executive is supported by a team of directors representing: education; housing and social services; resources; environmental services and Swindon services. The education department was restructured with effect from June 2002; there are now three divisions – '*services to pupils*', '*school improvement*', and '*planning and resources*'. Since the previous inspection there has been a complete change of senior managers in the education department. The new leadership team for education took up their posts between October 2002 and January 2003.

Funding

36. Funding was well below average at the time of the previous inspection; it remains below average.

37. Swindon's education Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) was consistently below the national average for both the primary and secondary sector. The Education Formula

Spending Share (EFSS) in 2003/2004 remains below the averages for both statistical neighbours and nationally, although the percentage increase was, for the first time, above the national average. Additional grant funding for Swindon is relatively low, but in line with the level of need. A recent New Opportunities Fund bid has generated £1.3 million for sports facilities in schools.

38. Swindon has spent just above SSA on education since 2001/02 (Table 1). In 2003/2004 a 15 per cent council tax rise allowed increased spending on schools above the target set by central Government.

Table 1: Education SSA/EFSS and expenditure

Academic Year	SSA / EFSS for education £M	Net expenditure on education- £M	Expenditure as per cent of SSA/ EFSS
2001/2002	80,046	80,047	100.0 per cent
2002/2003	82,110	83,274	101.4 per cent
2003/2004*	93,003	95,128	102.3 per cent

Data Source: LEA form 2

** information from LEA on EFSS*

39. The funding delegated to schools in the 2002/2003 individual schools budget remained well below the average for all comparators (Table 2), reflecting the comparably low SSA. Of the 46 unitary authorities, Swindon had the lowest level of individual schools budget funding per secondary pupil, and the second lowest for primary pupils.

Table 2: Primary and secondary individual schools budget

	Swindon LEA £ per pupil	Statistical neighbours £ per pupil	Unitary authorities £ per pupil	England £ per pupil
Primary individual schools budget	1,960	2,110	2,153	2,223
Secondary individual schools budget	2,573	2,843	2,852	2,940

Data source: CIPFA Section 52 data 2002/03.

40. Delegation, at 86 per cent in 2002/2003, is close to the England average but below that of similar authorities. Swindon devolved a lower level of Standards Fund (63 per cent) at the beginning of 2002/2003 compared with other LEAs, the lowest of any unitary authority.

Table 3: centrally controlled revenue spending

	Swindon LEA £ per pupil	Statistical neighbours £ per pupil	Unitary authorities £ per pupil	England £ per pupil
Strategic management	58	84	93	101
Special education	174	141	151	160
School improvement	18	24	26	31
Access	122	124	124	131

Data source: CIPFA Section 52 data 2002/03.

41. Swindon spends well below comparators on strategic management and school improvement (Table 3). Taking account of both centrally retained and delegated funding, Swindon's overall expenditure on special educational needs is slightly below the average for similar authorities and nationally. Centrally controlled spending on special educational needs is above average and planned spending has increased markedly over the last three years. Some 20 to 25 per cent of the special educational needs resources held centrally are devolved during the year to support individual pupils. In 2002/2003 most of the budget for special educational needs was directed towards specialist provision in schools, mainstream units and the pupil referral unit and not through the mainstream school funding formula.

42. Capital expenditure per pupil is close to the average for similar authorities but below the England average. However, it has increased steeply over the last three years, largely through receipts from property sales, and is projected to continue to grow in line with the council's five-year capital strategy. A priority has been the provision of additional school places in housing development areas. The LEA has received approval for a £58 million Private Finance Initiative project to build schools in the north of the borough.

The LEA's strategy for school improvement

43. The strategy for school improvement, which includes the programmes for the first year of the Education Development Plan 2002 – 2007 (EDP 2), is satisfactory. At the time of the previous inspection the EDP was unsatisfactory.

44. The audit for the EDP 2 was thorough, drawing on a range of data, including a comprehensive evaluation of the previous development plan. Good account was taken of local circumstances, issues of particular concern to the LEA, recommendations from the previous inspection and the LEA's other statutory plans. The decision to follow the national priorities and to add only one local priority is sensible and the rationale for the inclusion of the local priority of recruitment and retention of teachers is sound. A strong aspect of the plan is the success criteria that form the objectives. These are clear, appropriate and realistic and provide a sound basis for measuring progress over the full five years of the plan. However, the milestones against which the success of the plan is to be judged on a year-by-

year basis are much less well defined. The links between resources and the constituent priorities and activities within the plan are articulated clearly.

45. Performance targets for 2004 are challenging. There was a shortfall in meeting the targets for 2002. In English and mathematics at Key Stage 2, the shortfalls were eight per cent and four per cent respectively. For the proportion of pupils achieving at least five A*-C grades at GCSE, the shortfall was four per cent. Based on these results and current trends, an increase by 2004 of 12 percentage points in English, 15 percentage points in mathematics, and six percentage points for five or more A*-C grades at GCSE implies an improvement rate considerably greater than in previous years. Targets for 2004 at Key Stage 3 also require a faster rate of progress compared with current trends. There are gaps between the schools' aggregated targets for 2004 and the LEA's targets, especially at Key Stage 2. Senior officers recognise that the current rates of progress between key stages are uneven and that there is wide variation in the performance of individual schools. There is now an improved foundation for mutual accountability between the LEA and its schools upon which more rapid development can be built, with schools, in general, accepting the need for challenge and greater improvement.

46. The implementation of the EDP 2 is satisfactory. There have been some notable successes in implementing the priorities for English and mathematics, in reducing the numbers of schools causing concern and in supporting minority ethnic groups and pupils with English as an additional language. More modest, but nevertheless sound, improvements have been secured in developing and supporting school self-review. There has been some slippage, for example in supporting developments in information and communication technology within the curriculum and in improving the achievements of boys. Discontinuity of staffing and the related problems of insufficient capacity and expertise have been continuing difficulties for the LEA throughout the implementation of the first year of the plan. Staffing is now more stable. A vacancy for an early years adviser has been filled with effect from September 2003 and interim arrangements have been made for information and communication technology.

47. At the time of the inspection, the new team of officers was in the process of finalising and submitting plans for the second year of the EDP 2. The priorities have remained unchanged. Activities and actions have been refreshed in the light of the evaluation of year one of the plan, an audit of performance data and a scrutiny of school development plans. Revised activities are focused carefully on key areas for improvement, although insufficient prominence is given to supporting gifted and talented pupils. Activities to support schools in raising the attainment of pupils with special educational needs and in developing further governors' strategic capacity have been strengthened. The revised plan has been costed and found to be an unfeasible proposition in its current form for the small team of core advisory staff. Moves are therefore being taken to rationalise actions and to identify the activities where external support and brokerage are essential.

48. The weaknesses in the proposed plan for the second year of the EDP 2 outweigh its strengths. The plan has been drafted by a number of different individuals and there is wide variation in the extent to which purposeful links have been made between priorities, purposes of programmes, actions and success criteria. Some actions are defined vaguely and not outlined in sufficient detail for it to be obvious what the LEA intends to do and, in many cases, when it intends to do it. Timescales are, in the main, inadequately defined, criteria for

judging the success of the plan are uneven in quality and the statement of monitoring and evaluation is unclear.

Recommendations

In order to improve the effectiveness of EDP 2:

- improve the links between priorities, purposes of programmes, actions and success criteria;

ensure sharper details are provided for activities and actions;

clarify procedures for monitoring and evaluating the plan; and
- identify clear timescales for actions and milestones for judging success against which the plan can be monitored and evaluated.

The allocation of resources to priorities

49. The allocation of resources to priorities was poor at the time of the last inspection, but it has improved and is now satisfactory. Budgetary decisions and the management of school budgets are now more transparent, in line with the recommendations of the previous report.

50. Budgetary decisions in education are transparent and well linked to priorities. The education department has a strategic plan with clear priorities against which budgets are allocated. Budgets are aligned with team business plans and spending is monitored regularly. Budgetary control is good, especially in the area of special educational needs. In 2003/2004 there was a 9.7 per cent increase in funding for schools and an additional £300,000 was allocated to strengthen capacity for asset management planning, information and communication technology and curriculum support for pupils with special educational needs.

51. The council's corporate planning and budget-making processes lag behind those in the education department. Members agree that funding of schools is a priority and, over the last two years, have approved 15 per cent rises in council tax to allow increases in education funding to be passed on to schools. However, this ongoing commitment is not yet clearly reflected in corporate plans. The links between corporate planning and the allocation of resources across the council are weak. The lack of consistent corporate priorities means the budget process is driven by departments. A medium-term revenue plan has recently gone to cabinet as a first step in linking service and budget planning for the 2004/2005 budget. Corporate recharges have been reassessed. The charges are now more transparent but there has been insufficient progress in developing service level agreements that include clear, agreed service standards.

52. Consultation about budgets and the rationale for funding is inclusive and focused clearly. The Schools' Forum is operating satisfactorily, chaired by a headteacher. The school funding formula is currently being reviewed by a sub-group with headteacher representatives. The review includes an in-depth consideration of both retained funding and

the elements of the formula. Early discussions have focused on funding for pupils with special educational needs.

53. Schools generally manage their budgets well, but excessively high levels of uncommitted surpluses are still held by too many primary and special schools. At the end of the 2002/03 financial year, 12 primary schools and two special schools had contingencies of more than ten per cent of their budgets. The LEA requires schools to provide an account of their balances and reports these to the education partnership board and cabinet. This has not yet led to reductions in the contingencies and insufficient guidance is given to schools about appropriate levels of such funds. These uncommitted surpluses weaken the case for additional funding for schools. Schools with deficits are identified quickly and given good support as part of the process for schools causing concern.

Recommendations

In order to reduce underspending by primary and special schools:

- give guidance to headteachers and governors on the appropriate level of school reserves; and
- offer challenge to schools with the highest levels of uncommitted surpluses.

Strategies to promote continuous improvement, including Best Value

54. The council's strategies to ensure continuous improvement were poor at the time of the last inspection. They are now satisfactory. The council has acted on the recommendations in the previous report by refocusing the Best Value programme and improving the process for reviews.

55. Since the appointment of the council's strategic partner, the Best Value review programme has been suspended in education to prioritise the delivery of the contract as the prime mechanism for delivering Best Value. This was a sensible course of action. The strategic partner and the establishment of the education partnership board have greatly strengthened the LEA's capacity to drive improvement by establishing a clear set of strategic objectives and a planning framework within which to achieve these. There is a recognition by senior officers across the council of the need for change. The strategic partner's training for managing change has been effective. The LEA's self-assessment was accurate and realistic, demonstrating good self-knowledge. The response to the previous inspection has led to some improvement in most areas.

56. Education has a developing performance management framework, which includes a commitment to achieve Investors in People status by December 2004. This framework links individual targets to the team and strategic education targets expressed in their business plans. All members of staff have been appraised. However, this co-ordinated approach is very recent and there is further work needed across the department to ensure that all staff understand fully how they contribute to the performance of the LEA.

57. The lack of corporate leadership has constrained the effectiveness of the Best Value process. The Best Value Performance Plan for 2002/2003 did not meet the expected standard

due to some weaknesses in performance information. The council now shows a clear commitment to delivering improvement through its restructuring and allocation of considerable corporate resources to deliver change. This is focused appropriately but it is too recent to have had a tangible effect. An improved Best Value toolkit has been produced with members taking a fuller part in reviews. Project control has been strengthened and additional resources dedicated to prevent reviews from over-running. Rightly, challenge has been strengthened with effective use of internal and external stakeholders and experts. Best Value reviews have been regrouped as larger, more crosscutting reviews such as 'public realm' covering front-line services. Scrutiny by members remains weak, and at least one review has not been to scrutiny panel almost a year after completion, limiting its impact.

Section 2: Support for school improvement

Summary of the LEA's support for school improvement

58. The monitoring, challenge and support for schools have improved since the previous inspection. There are significantly fewer schools causing concern, but the performance of individual schools remains variable and there is underachievement by boys and by some minority ethnic groups. The LEA's support for literacy, numeracy, governors, looked after children and finance, and that given by the educational welfare and educational psychological services, are strengths of the work of the LEA. There is sound support for pupils with special educational needs and for behaviour. Variations in the quality of some of the support from the management support services distract headteachers from a sharp focus on school improvement. The LEA continues to have a good range of data, but the analysis and application of these data are underdeveloped. Primary schools currently receive poor support for information and communication technology in the curriculum.

The effectiveness of services to support school improvement

59. At the time of the previous inspection, the effectiveness of the LEA's services to support school improvement was unsatisfactory overall, and in some respects poor. It is now, with the exception of strategic planning, satisfactory. Since the previous inspection, considerable effort has been put into building a more effective school improvement service and its positive impact can now be seen in individual schools. The service provides satisfactory value for money.

60. The major responsibility for supporting schools in their efforts to improve rests with the school improvement service. The leadership of the service is satisfactory. The managers took up their posts too recently to be able to demonstrate a sustained effect, but they are beginning to make a difference. Communication with schools is improving. Rightly, the service focuses strongly on implementing the EDP but there is no adequate service plan. Furthermore, as indicated in Section 1 of this report, the planning for the second year of the EDP 2 lacks precision and is too uneven in quality.

61. Within the constraints of a small service, school improvement staff are deployed suitably, according to the EDP priorities and schools' needs. All school improvement plans have been reviewed by the school improvement service in the light of EDP priorities. Workloads are monitored in an attempt to ensure that staff are not overburdened. In practice, this is not always effective as staff work extremely hard to improve the performance of the service and to cover vacant posts until they are filled. Recent vacancies have adversely affected information and communication technology, early years, the secondary phase, and special educational needs and inclusion. Appointments have been made and the staffing of the service will be almost complete for the next academic year. In the current year, roles and responsibilities have been reviewed, pressure points identified, and consultants and advisory headteachers recruited to ease the load. The balance of expertise has improved since the previous inspection and the service has been strengthened by the appointment of additional staff with recent experience of senior management in primary and secondary schools and of applying Ofsted inspection criteria. However, there are gaps in expertise, notably in

curricular coverage. A brokerage system to help schools to obtain quality-assured support from alternative providers is at a very early stage of development.

62. The education department has reviewed its performance management system, which is now satisfactory. In addition to six-monthly reviews and annual appraisal interviews, school improvement staff benefit from monthly support and supervision meetings with line managers. Arrangements for meeting continuing professional development needs that have been identified through performance review have suffered from shortages of staffing and time. Requirements for team training have been met more effectively than personal professional development needs. A comprehensive service handbook and a helpful induction pack have been published recently.

Monitoring, challenge and intervention

63. The extent to which the LEA had defined monitoring, challenge and intervention and shared those understandings with schools was poor in the last inspection. This aspect of the LEA's work is now satisfactory and both recommendations from the corresponding section of the previous report have been implemented. The criteria for intervention are clear and action taken is proportional to need.

64. The first recommendation in the previous inspection was that the LEA should interpret the Code of Practice for LEA-school relations so that roles and responsibilities were understood and that working practices for monitoring, challenge and intervention were clear. The LEA has done this by publishing a document, *Working together for school improvement*, which makes clear the respective roles of the LEA and schools and distinguishes accurately between monitoring, challenge, intervention and support. Appropriate forms of challenge and triggers for intervention are listed. Although not involved in writing the document, headteachers and chairs of governors were consulted when it was in draft form and it has received the general approval of schools.

65. The second recommendation was that the LEA should improve the transparency and effectiveness of the process of categorising schools by involving headteachers and governors. The LEA has responded by ensuring that headteachers and chairs of governing bodies participate in the annual categorisation discussion, and by providing written guidance which stresses that effective categorisation is a co-operative process. Schools acknowledge that their allocation to categories now works well and, in the 2002/2003 process, there were no appeals.

The focusing of the LEA's support on areas of greatest need

66. The extent to which the LEA's support to schools was focused on areas of greatest need was unsatisfactory at the time of the last inspection. It is now highly satisfactory. The previous report recommended that schools should be helped to understand their responsibility for improvement and to procure support for themselves. A second recommendation was that the LEA should ensure that support was deployed clearly in relation to needs by refining the categorisation process to reflect closely the schools' performance. The first recommendation has been implemented in part, and the second fully.

67. *Working together for school improvement* makes a suitable distinction between LEA support which is available to schools as an entitlement and that which may be purchased for their own identified improvement needs. The schools understand this distinction and receive sufficient delegated funds to purchase support. However, the LEA's current range of traded services and its capacity to broker support for schools to procure from other suppliers are limited.

68. The quality of the LEA's performance data was good at the time of the previous inspection and has been refined further. The data are used increasingly effectively by the school improvement service to target its work according to schools' needs. Fundamental to this differentiation is the allocation of schools to one of three categories, according to a revised system about which schools were consulted. Category 1 schools receive only a light touch from the LEA. Those in category 2 have a support plan drawn up by the link adviser, the headteacher and the chair of governors. Category 3 schools include those in special measures or with serious weaknesses and are subject to a plan drawn up by a project group of relevant officers, advisers and consultants. The school improvement service's analysis of its deployment of advisers and consultants shows that support is allocated to need effectively, with category 3 schools receiving approximately twice as much time as those in the second category and about ten times that given to category 1 schools.

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

69. This aspect of the LEA's work was highly satisfactory at the time of the previous inspection. No fieldwork was therefore undertaken. The LEA's self-evaluation, evidence from schools and other documentary evidence indicate that the quality of provision has been maintained.

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

70. This aspect of the LEA's support was unsatisfactory at the time of the previous inspection. It is now satisfactory.

71. The number of schools placed in categories of concern by Ofsted inspections has almost halved in the current academic year. In October 2002, there were three schools in special measures; six with serious weaknesses and three categorised as underachieving. These numbers have now reduced to two, three and two respectively.

72. The LEA is making satisfactory progress in implementing the recommendation of the previous report that advisers' skills should be developed so that they are confident in identifying schools causing concern and dealing quickly and decisively with difficulties. Implementation has been hindered by gaps and changes in the staffing of the school improvement service. As is illustrated by the primary school that was placed in special measures after an inspection in May 2003, identification and intervention are not yet fully effective, but they are now improving following the strengthening of the primary and secondary advisory teams. Evidence from Ofsted inspections has shown that too many schools have needed improvement, but the proportion has decreased over the past 12 months. In the LEA's categorisation system for the current academic year, there has been a significant

increase in the proportion of schools in category 1 and a corresponding decrease in category 3.

73. The procedures for identifying, monitoring and intervening in schools causing concern are sound and are being implemented with increasing consistency. Schools in categories of concern confirm that they receive planned, co-ordinated and differentiated support. In most cases, difficulties are tackled promptly and decisively, but problems persist in a handful of schools. The two secondary schools to emerge most recently from special measures did so in two years and four terms respectively. The two most recent primary schools both came out in 19 months. These are all satisfactory timescales. Sensibly, schools previously in the special measures and serious weaknesses categories are placed in the LEA's category 2 with a target of transfer to category 1 within 18 months. Each has an LEA support plan that aims to reduce the level of support in line with the school's improvement over that period.

74. The progress of schools causing concern is reviewed regularly through reports to the education partnership board and the education leadership team. The progress of all schools is reviewed at half-termly intervals by officers representative of all relevant support services.

75. The LEA has used some of its legal powers when schools' progress has been inadequate. One headteacher has been replaced and a small number of others have been set performance targets. Additional governors have been appointed to strengthen governing bodies and, in one school, a bursar has been allocated. Although the LEA has not yet removed delegated budgets from schools, two have been warned that this may happen.

Support for literacy

76. Support for literacy was previously good. No fieldwork was therefore carried out in the current inspection. The LEA's self-evaluation, the views of senior managers within schools and other documentary evidence confirm that the good quality of support has been maintained.

Support for numeracy

77. Support for numeracy was previously highly satisfactory. Improvements have been made and support is now good. The strategy continues to be managed well and the new consultants are seen by schools to be well informed and credible. There are close links with the literacy and Key Stage 3 strategies.

78. Over the last three years, the improvement in standards at Key Stage 1 has been in line with the trend nationally and for similar authorities. In 2002, standards at this key stage were broadly in line with national averages, but below the averages for similar authorities. At Key Stage 2, the improvement in standards over the last three years has been below the national trend and that for similar authorities. Standards at Key Stage 2 are below the national average and the average in similar LEAs. The gap between the 2002 results and the 2004 target is 13 per cent at Level 4 and ten per cent at Level 5, both of which are higher than the national gap.

79. Just over half of the schools have been targeted for in-depth support at Key Stage 2. These schools have made considerable progress. For example, over the last three years the schools receiving intensive support have improved at twice the national average rate and three times the average rate for the rest of the schools in the LEA. Many of those not receiving additional support either made no improvement or even saw their results decline. All schools are now provided with some support, especially in analysing test results and setting targets for improvement. The LEA has seen an increase in the rate of improvement. In 2002, the proportion of pupils attaining Level 4 or above at Key Stage 2 rose by three per cent, compared with a two per cent rise nationally; the proportion attaining at least a Level 5 rose by 3 per cent, in line with the national rise.

80. The LEA's strategy for raising standards of numeracy is clear and understood by schools. Co-ordinators interviewed spoke highly of the training that they had received, particularly through the five-day courses and the recent courses on problem-solving. There are well-established systems for sharing good practice, for example through demonstration lessons and the planned use of high performing schools, network meetings of co-ordinators and a database of best practice. An innovative new strategy involves a project-based approach in eight schools where standards in both English and mathematics are consistently low, and where there are leadership and management issues. Link advisers work with the schools and subject consultants to produce a 'raising achievement plan' to help co-ordinate and manage the support and challenge from both the numeracy and literacy teams.

Support for information and communication technology

81. At the time of the previous inspection, the LEA's support to schools for the use of ICT in the curriculum and for raising standards in this area was very poor. Since then, other than through the national Key Stage 3 strategy, little progress has been made and primary schools currently receive poor support. The LEA has been only partly successful in implementing the recommendation from the previous report. It has revised the ICT strategy but it has not focused on the central function of monitoring standards and has only just begun to broker support from outside sources.

82. The revised strategy was the subject of thorough consultation with a representative group of headteachers and governors. It is a sound document that gives due emphasis to attainment and to the quality of teaching and learning but pays insufficient attention to assessment. The LEA has had no adviser for ICT for over a year. However, the ICT consultant for the Key Stage 3 strategy was appointed a term early, in April 2002, and useful support was given for development planning in primary schools. All the schools have signed up for New Opportunities Fund training but its impact has been variable and the LEA has no firm knowledge of completion rates. Eighty-seven per cent of primary schools and all special schools have met the national targets for computer:pupil ratios, but only six of the ten secondary schools have done so. Currently, the LEA is not in a secure position to confirm that all the primary schools are meeting national curriculum requirements in ICT.

83. Although examples of good practice have occasionally been identified and used, primary schools receive very little monitoring or advice. No systems are in place to collate or analyse standards. Targets for ICT have not been set and schools have been given very little guidance on assessing the levels of pupils' work. Consequently, the LEA's knowledge

of the quality of primary schools' work and of what their pupils know, understand and can do in this curricular area is very limited.

Recommendation

In order to improve the support for information and communication technology:

- devise and implement effective systems of monitoring and evaluation in order to secure accurate knowledge of primary schools' progress and the levels of their pupils' attainment in ICT.

84. The implementation of an interim support plan for primary schools commenced in April 2003. A consultant is providing a limited amount of training while another has commenced a review, which will result in recommendations about the nature and extent of long-term support to be implemented in September 2004. In the short term, with effect from September 2003, two expert teachers will each be seconded for two days a week to support primary schools. As the LEA considers that ICT is central to its work in raising standards, much remains to be done in the provision of monitoring, guidance and support.

Recommendation

In order to improve the support for information and communication technology:

- provide support to primary schools, targeted to their identified needs.

Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3

85. The LEA's support to schools for raising standards at Key Stage 3 is highly satisfactory. This aspect of the LEA's work was not included in the previous inspection.

86. The LEA has adopted the national Key Stage 3 strategy and is implementing it effectively. The secondary schools have welcomed the strategy and rate the LEA's support highly. The strategy team's five consultants provide a range of curricular advice that was previously not available in this small LEA and the strategy's framework is seen by the schools' strategy managers as a useful template for improvement. In particular, the Key Stage 3 audit fits well with schools' approaches to self-review and is used, in some cases, in Key Stage 4 also. Written agreements for each strand of the strategy are negotiated between the LEA and each school. Each agreement makes clear the responsibilities of the LEA and the schools, but not all agreements have yet been signed by the schools.

87. The strategy is currently managed effectively by a part-time consultant with recent headship experience. A permanent full-time manager will take over from September 2003 and the LEA plans to appoint a consultant for the attendance and behaviour strand in the near future. All school strategy managers are members of their senior management teams and, in almost all cases, are judged by the LEA to provide effective leadership. They meet half-termly to consider management and planning issues. The strand consultants hold termly

meetings for subject specialist teachers. These subject networks are used well to provide information and advice and to disseminate good practice.

88. The strand consultants are regarded by schools as expert, credible and flexible. Training has involved teachers in all secondary and special schools and has received very positive evaluations. Courses have also been provided for non-teaching staff and governors. There has been a sensible recent shift in the balance of consultants' time from training to in-school support. This work is also appreciated by schools.

89. School strategy managers report that all five strands have been effective in different ways but that information and communication technology has had the most noticeable effect, partly because previous provision was so poor. The literacy and numeracy strands have made most progress in the development of cross-phase perspectives on teaching and learning, but cross-curricular developments have not yet been strongly established. Leading English and mathematics teachers are in place but have not been used to full effect. Applications are now being considered for appointments as leading teachers for the other three strands.

90. The four schools receiving intensive support were identified effectively through the use of improved value added data, the categorisation process, and consultants' and advisers' written records of visits. Other schools are targeted according to specific needs, such as the performance of girls in science. A successful initiative, which is to be repeated, involved the strategy team in working in a school for two periods of four days, with an intervening evaluation phase.

91. The well-established system of grouping schools in pyramid clusters aids pupils' transition from primary to secondary schools, but the transfer of information operates inconsistently. A literacy project is creating teacher assessment systems and portfolios of pupils' work throughout Years 1 to 9. Low attaining pupils are closely monitored on transition and funds have been allocated in the strategy's budget to focus support on high-attaining pupils also. The two summer schools in 2002 concentrated on primary-secondary transition. Two more are planned for 2003.

Support for minority ethnic groups, including Travellers

92. The LEA's support for minority ethnic groups, including Travellers, was highly satisfactory at the time of the previous inspection. No fieldwork was carried out in the current inspection. The LEA's self-evaluation and the school survey confirm that the quality of support has been maintained.

Support for gifted and talented pupils

93. The support to schools for gifted and talented pupils is satisfactory. The previous report recommended that more sustained measures should be taken to emphasise to schools the importance of making at least adequate provision for the most able and talented pupils. The LEA has taken several steps to implement the recommendation. These include: the revision of its policy for the education of gifted, more able and talented pupils; the appointment of a lead adviser for this work; the establishment of networks of school co-ordinators; and the identification of gifted and talented pupils as the shared responsibility of

all school improvement staff. However, this area of support is not included within the EDP and has no specific allocation of funding. The quality of implementation in schools remains mixed.

Recommendation

In order to improve the support for gifted and talented pupils:

- include support for gifted and talented pupils within the EDP 2.

94. Strengths and weaknesses in schools' provision are identified through their self-evaluation and through an analysis of individual pupil data, Ofsted inspection reports, and school improvement plans. All the schools now have a co-ordinator for their work with gifted and talented pupils and about a third have a nominated governor. Schools are developing policies, based on guidance in the LEA's policy which clearly defines the roles of the LEA, schools and governing bodies. Secondary and primary networks of co-ordinators meet termly and, in each case, about half the schools are represented. The secondary group has shared some good practice and is developing a website for this purpose. The primary schools receive a useful newsletter that disseminates good practice and is distributed widely across the school improvement and support services.

95. Training in the provision of effective support for gifted and talented pupils has been provided for advisers, consultants and school co-ordinators and governors, and has received positive evaluations. Attention to the aspect is also given in training for the literacy, numeracy and Key Stage 3 strategies. School improvement staff now regard it as part of their routine monitoring and support work. Link advisers work with schools to set targets for high attaining pupils.

96. Support for gifted and talented pupils has more effect in core subjects than across the curriculum. There is an upward trend in the proportions of pupils gaining higher grades in both primary and secondary schools and the LEA's performance is now broadly in line with the national and statistical neighbours' averages.

97. An audit of provision for gifted and talented pupils has revealed a wide range of opportunities in the areas of LEA support, targeted coaching and mentoring, community-based enrichment, school-based enrichment, classroom differentiation, and extension and acceleration. It is not yet clear how this information will be used by schools. Two summer schools for gifted and talented young people have been held in each of the past three years. In 2003, one will focus on the arts and the other on science and ICT.

Support for governors

98. Support for governors was previously good. No fieldwork was carried out in the current inspection. The LEA's self-evaluation, the views of senior managers and governors within schools and other documentary evidence confirm that the good quality of support has been maintained.

Support for school management

99. The support for school leadership and management was satisfactory at the time of the last inspection and remains so. A high priority has been placed on supporting and improving leadership and management, and activities to promote developments are a prominent feature of the EDP 2. The overall effect of strategies and activities is not yet evident, but there are a number of examples of individual schools or groups of schools where needs have been identified and effective support provided. There has been a marked improvement in the level and focus of co-ordinated support for schools in special measures or with serious weaknesses.

100. Evidence from Ofsted inspections indicates that proportionally more schools in Swindon require improvement in leadership and management than schools nationally or in similar LEAs, although the evidence from inspections of primary schools over the last twelve months indicates some recent improvements. Around a half of primary schools and a third of secondary schools are considered by the LEA to be proficient in school self-review. The LEA is placing efforts and energies into improving this profile. A range of courses are on offer, linking schools' self-evaluation to their improvement planning, and a creditable framework for school self-review has been developed by a working party of headteachers and lead advisers. There are satisfactory arrangements for the dissemination of good practice through conferences, seminars and newsletters and through the judicious use of consultant headteachers and other senior staff from schools.

101. Training and support for literacy and numeracy co-ordinators are valued highly, and support for subject leaders in secondary schools is developing pace through the Key Stage 3 strategy. Rightly, the LEA recognises that more could be done to help schools to secure good quality support for middle managers, especially those in foundation subjects. The LEA is therefore moving towards improving the arrangements for brokering such support and for helping schools more generally to adopt the principles of Best Value. The LEA has a good range of data available and the potential to offer schools a wide range of benchmarked information. There is, however, resistance from schools to making this information open and transparent. The high level of uncommitted surpluses indicates that more work is needed to improve the quality of resource management in some primary and special schools.

Recommendation

In order to improve support for school leadership and management:

- work with schools to produce an acceptable framework for benchmarking performance to establish their confidence in sharing and using comparative data.

The effectiveness of services to support school management

102. The effectiveness of services to support school management was unsatisfactory at the time of the previous inspection. This function is now satisfactory. The LEA has published a schools' services handbook and is providing advice to schools on purchasing from alternative providers, in line with the recommendations made in the previous report.

103. The directory of services to support schools, published in 2002, is set out clearly with good information on traded and statutory services in education, on service standards and on costs. Information on services from other parts of the council, such as those provided by Swindon Services (cleaning, catering, caretaking and grounds maintenance), is less clear. In some of these services costs were not analysed carefully at the time of delegation. Some services, such as financial support, are offered at several different levels and most meet schools' needs well through tailored service level agreements. The brochure includes information on external providers and useful guidance for schools wishing to purchase elsewhere. Schools purchase services from a range of providers and joint purchasing by groups of schools is growing, encouraged by the LEA.

104. The performance of services varies widely. Some services, such as financial and personnel support, are valued highly by schools, while others such as building maintenance, grounds maintenance and cleaning are seen as very poor. Schools generally have more negative views of the services provided by other parts of the council, believing them to lack customer focus. This is not entirely justified. Service standards are clear and, for the services provided by Swindon Services, a schools liaison officer monitors performance regularly, contacting schools and following up poor performance. These efforts have not always had sufficient impact on improving the service received by schools.

105. An independent brokerage contract has recently been let, which will support schools in purchasing services more widely. The procurement process has been carried out in consultation with schools and the contract will be monitored by a board with a majority of school representatives. It is too early to assess its impact.

106. Increasingly, the LEA is using the half-termly reviews of all schools to link the effectiveness of schools' management of their finance, staff and building responsibilities with school improvement.

107. **Financial services** were good at the time of the previous inspection. No fieldwork was undertaken for this inspection, but the LEA's self-evaluation and the school survey indicate that they remain good.

108. At the time of the 2001 inspection **personnel services** were highly satisfactory. No fieldwork was carried out this time, but the LEA's self-evaluation and the school survey indicate that they remain so. Payroll services were, however, the subject of considerable negative comment from schools, many of which were considering purchasing a service from another source. Headteachers did not report any improvement stemming from the movement of the education payroll team to work more closely with personnel services.

109. **Property services** were very poor at the time of the last inspection and they remain poor. The LEA does not offer a maintenance service and, although advice is available from the council's technical services, this is not well regarded by schools and few use it. The new brokerage arrangements should help to fill this support gap. Relationships with schools over building issues are weak. Buildings maintenance and the management of building projects are rated negatively by schools. Two officers are the main points of contact with 83 schools in relation to buildings issues. This is inadequate support.

110. Services for **information and communication technology in school administration** were poor at the time of the last inspection. They are now satisfactory. The LEA is responding to the recommendation to implement an ICT strategy for the education service. The LEA does not offer technical support for administrative ICT in schools and all but one of the schools buy into a satisfactory locally provided support service. The directory of services to support schools provides useful information on alternative suppliers of technical support and advice on how to procure this. Schools are encouraged to group together to purchase support.

111. There is now a satisfactory corporate strategy for ICT which is addressing the serious shortcomings in corporate systems and investment. There is also a focused education strategy for ICT with a costed action plan. Additional funding was provided for ICT in the 2003/2004 budget for education and restructuring has brought the ICT manager for education together with staff dealing with information management and performance review. Good links are developing between the corporate manager of ICT and the newly appointed ICT manager within education. The LEA has set up an ICT group with headteacher, governor and bursar representatives to monitor the strategy. The LEA's membership of the South West Grid for Learning has enabled the roll-out of broadband to all secondary schools and will provide the infrastructure for electronic information exchange with schools, though this is not yet in place. Schools are increasingly using e-mail to communicate with the LEA. Internal systems are being developed by the LEA to eliminate the repeat entry of data, but this has not yet been achieved.

112. **Cleaning, caretaking and catering** were poor at the time of the previous inspection; **grounds maintenance** was not inspected. All are now satisfactory, but the prospects for further improvement are uncertain.

113. Cleaning, caretaking, catering and operational grounds maintenance are offered by Swindon Services. Schools are encouraged to group together to purchase services and a centrally-funded client team offers *ad hoc* support to schools wishing to purchase from another source. The monitoring of these services by a school liaison officer, described earlier, has not had enough impact on improving service delivery.

114. The cleaning service is bought by one-third of schools and fewer than one-fifth buy the caretaking service. Most schools employ their own staff directly. However, there is little competition locally and schools often return to the service provided by the authority due to difficulties in recruiting cleaners. The service level agreements are detailed, site-specific, tailored to school needs and carefully costed. Despite detailed service standards and regular monitoring, schools report a poor service because of inadequate supervision of staff. The 'school watch' security service has reduced insurance claims and is effective, particularly for schools with no resident caretaker.

115. One-third of schools buy the **grounds maintenance** service which is specified according to each school's needs and based on a schedule of rates. The service was not costed properly at the time of delegation. Recent substantially increased charges and a poor service have led to large numbers of schools buying from another source. However, most of those schools which have remained with the contract report a satisfactory service.

116. Sixty-four primary schools and one secondary school buy the **catering service**. Catering was also not costed properly at the time of delegation and is making a loss as secondary schools have purchased from another source. Service level agreements for 2004/2005 will be re-priced. Communication with schools on contract details is sometimes poor. Despite monitoring by managers and the school liaison officer, there remains too much variability in the performance of individual staff, which reflects inadequate training and supervision.

Recommendation

In order to improve the quality of the cleaning, grounds maintenance and catering services to schools:

- strengthen the supervision of staff in schools and ensure they are aware of the service standards to which they are working.

117. The contractor's menus are approved by a dietician for nutritional value. Take-up of free school meals has increased to 73 per cent from 63 per cent three years ago as a result of direct marketing to parents.

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

118. This area was not previously inspected. Support for assuring the quality and supply of teachers is satisfactory. Strategies to support the recruitment of teachers are more firmly established than those designed to aid retention.

119. Statistical evidence is used increasingly well to inform short- and medium-term planning. The data for 2002 indicate that vacancy rates for Swindon are below the national average and in line with averages in neighbouring LEAs. This represents an improvement compared with the relatively high vacancy rates of recent years. Despite this improvement, schools in Swindon are still experiencing difficulties in attracting well-qualified teachers with the appropriate expertise in core subjects. Moreover, schools in challenging circumstances are finding it hard to recruit and retain the number and quality of teachers required. There is an above average number of teachers in the borough due to retire in the next few years, suggesting that recruitment difficulties could worsen. Recruitment and retention of teachers and headteachers have been identified as areas of local need and included as a priority within the EDP 2.

120. The LEA has helped to instigate several well-based strategies for recruiting teachers. For example, attendance at recruitment fairs across a range of geographical regions. Relevant courses are offered for those interested in teaching as a career and for those teachers who have taken a career break. Secondary schools have been successful in a bid to run a school-centred course for initial teacher training from September 2003. Two successful bids for starter homes have helped to recruit and retain 20 teachers in Swindon and more such bids are planned. All newly appointed teachers are offered advice and assistance with finding housing and approximately a third of the available low cost rented accommodation has been taken up by teachers in the area.

121. The LEA does not have a clear policy or a well understood strategy for continuing professional development. Progress on developing the role of advanced skills teachers has also, until recently, been limited. However, with the appointment of a new lead adviser in September 2002, much needed improvements are being made to outmoded systems and quality assurance arrangements for continuing professional development. External funding is being used to plan a professional development programme for teachers in their first five years of teaching. Rightly, there is recognition that a much clearer strategic direction is needed and consequently the development and implementation of a strategy for continuing professional development feature within action plans for the second year of the EDP 2.

122. Support for newly qualified teachers is satisfactory. The programme for these teachers in secondary schools has been revised, in line with the recommendation in the previous report. Arrangements for the induction of new headteachers are satisfactory overall but uneven in quality. This has been recognised, and a new mentoring scheme for headteachers has been planned in collaboration with local headteachers and neighbouring authorities.

Section 3: Special educational needs

Summary of effectiveness of LEA's special educational needs provision

123. The effectiveness of the strategy for SEN and the value for money obtained from SEN functions were very poor at the time of the last inspection. In addition, the effectiveness in meeting statutory obligations and supporting school improvement for SEN were poor. The provision for SEN is now satisfactory. There has been good progress in addressing the seven recommendations made. The new strategy for SEN and inclusion is widely supported and the plans for a continuum of provision have been outlined. Work has begun on the review of the funding formula, through which the strategy will be realised. There is widespread confidence that the new senior team of officers and the education partnership board can maintain this momentum. Teachers and partnership groups have a strong desire to see the new policy translated speedily into practice.

124. The programme of development work remaining for SEN and inclusion is substantial, but it is correctly focused. The full impact of developments will not be seen until the funding review is completed and implemented in April 2004. For that reason, there are no further recommendations made in this section of the report. The strengthened capacity of the LEA and improved leadership should concentrate on completing the positive developments that have been started.

The LEA's strategy for special educational needs

125. The strategy for SEN is now satisfactory. At the time of the last inspection, there was no coherent written strategy for SEN. The *SEN Inclusion Policy and Strategic Action Plan*, produced in autumn 2002, is clear, concise and details timed action points for translating policy into practice. Progress on the implementation of the action plan is on target. A large number of schools were involved in drawing up the new policy and action plan and there is widespread agreement with its objectives. A revised and strengthened officer structure has improved the capacity of the LEA to develop and implement the strategy. A new adviser for inclusive education is to be appointed from September 2003, which will provide further capacity and expertise.

126. To amplify the policy, the LEA has shared with headteachers, special needs co-ordinators and the education partnership board the key principles for inclusion, a transparent statement of the resources currently provided for SEN, and the outline of its plans for a continuum of provision for SEN from support in mainstream school classes through to full-time specialist provision. Work on the revision to the funding formula, which will use existing resources to provide this continuum, has begun with implementation planned for April 2004. There are currently six special schools, 21 schools with specially resourced provision and one pupil referral unit that co-ordinates a wide range of work for pupils without a school place.

127. The entitlement of pupils for SEN support in mainstream settings is set out clearly in the document '*SEN Code of Practice – action and action plus*', which is comprehensive and

includes descriptors for identifying individual pupil's needs in line with the Code of Practice. This entitlement document is well used by the special educational needs resourcing and assessment panel (SENRAP) to approve statutory assessments and to agree resources for additional needs.

128. Special educational needs is woven across the priorities of the EDP 2, particularly within the activities to address underachievement and raise attainment. However, the development of individual pupil data on the progress of the lowest achieving 20 per cent of pupils has been slow. Relevant data have now been produced and are being refined before they are provided to all schools from September 2003. The LEA is intending to use the data to set specific targets for the lowest performing pupils.

Statutory obligations

129. The LEA's performance in meeting its statutory duties for pupils with SEN is highly satisfactory. Systems for maintaining and monitoring statements of SEN, a significant weakness in 2001, have been refined. Some 92 per cent of all statements are completed to deadline in conjunction with other agencies, which is well above the level in similar authorities and nationally. Annual reviews, which require an account of the use of resources, are prompted and monitored satisfactorily by the LEA. Sensibly, the LEA's staff give priority to attending the annual reviews of pupils at points of transition.

130. The proportion of primary-aged pupils with statements of special educational need is in line with that found in similar authorities and nationally. For secondary-aged pupils, the proportion with statements is well above that found in similar LEAs and nationally. The number of statements maintained has fallen since 2001. In 2003, a quarter of all statements are maintained for pupils in Key Stage 4 and so this reducing trend is expected to continue. Earlier identification of SEN in early years settings and Key Stage 1 is now taking a higher priority.

131. The proportion of statements discontinued is relatively low. Special educational needs resourcing and assessment panel considers all requests for statutory assessment or additional funding for SEN. Rightly, the panel has concentrated on the application of the new SEN entitlement criteria and work is in progress to agree criteria for discontinuing of statements. The establishment of this panel in 2002 and the use of published criteria represents a significant improvement in the fairness and transparency in allocating support for special educational needs. As a result, appeals to the SEN tribunal have fallen and are at present very low. The parent partnership service continues to play a very valuable and effective role in advising parents, providing training, and contributing to the production of key documents explaining new developments.

School improvement

132. Support for school improvement in SEN is now satisfactory. There are sound criteria for assessment, which meet the requirements of the Code of Practice. These have been reviewed and developed in light of practice and are about to be re-issued to schools. The criteria are also usefully applied by SENRAP to approve funding for specific cases that do not require a statement. A SENRAP for early years has been established so that

continuity between early years settings and reception classes can be supported. Funding allocated via SENRAP is monitored through the annual review, which includes consideration of pupils' individual education plans.

133. Support services for SEN have been regrouped into one education support service headed by the principal educational psychologist. This is an effective approach to ensuring co-ordination of support. Schools value the work of the specialist support services. There has been a strong emphasis on building the capacity of schools and special educational needs co-ordinators to support SEN. The educational psychology service, which is highly regarded by schools, uses the majority of its time for intervention work, including some time in early years settings, and there is good evidence of the significant impact of this service. The rapid response scheme for those pupils in Key Stage 3 close to permanent exclusion has resulted in a significant fall in permanent exclusions in this age group. The scheme is to be expanded in the next academic year.

134. Special educational needs co-ordinators have access to an improved range of training and meetings to support them in their role. The handbook for SEN was updated in 2002 and will be issued to schools in the next few months. There are examples of good guidance provided by support services to schools, such as the '*Dyslexia Friendly Schools guidelines*' which set out clearly the range of difficulties experienced by such pupils and how they can be helped. In partnership with the primary care trust, the development of speech and language support within clusters of schools has been piloted successfully and is to be available in all clusters from September 2003.

135. There are a relatively large number of places in special schools and schools with specially resourced provision. Any unused capacity within a facility for a specialism, such as hearing impairment or special learning difficulties, is translated into outreach work, but schools are not clear how this outreach support can be obtained. However, in the schools with provision for moderate learning difficulties, any unallocated places are filled by pupils from that school who might otherwise be subject to a statement or receive additional resource via SENRAP. While this arrangement makes use of places that are already provided, the resources are not targeted equitably on the needs of all Swindon children. The future use of specialist-resourced provision and outreach work is included in the current review of provision for special educational needs.

Value for money

136. The value for money of the LEA's work in SEN has improved and is now satisfactory. Overall expenditure is just below the average for similar authorities. Special educational needs budgets are monitored and controlled well. Expenditure on out-of-borough placements is relatively high compared to similar authorities, but the budget has been brought under control and pupil numbers are falling. There are plans to provide some residential placements within the borough to make more effective use of this funding.

137. The establishment of SENRAP has improved the clarity of the allocation and use of funding for SEN, using published criteria for assessment and the provision of resources. These criteria ensure that schools and the LEA are clear on their respective roles and responsibilities. Schools and agencies are represented on the panel, which is chaired by a

headteacher so that there is a shared understanding of the needs of pupils and the use of resources.

138. Most SEN funding is held centrally at present. The current approach is one which, pending the review of the formula, ensures transparency and effective use of resources. Once schools are confident and accurate in the use of the criteria for assessment, the LEA intends that SENRAP will focus on the support for more complex needs and increased funding will be delegated to schools for other cases.

Section 4: Promoting social inclusion

Summary of effectiveness in promoting social inclusion

139. The corporate approach to social inclusion has lagged behind, and has not yet built sufficiently upon, the operational work in progress within departments and in partnership with other agencies. The local strategic partnership has not been established fully and consequently the draft community strategy is not supported with firm action plans to link the council's work with that of its key partners in the wider community. There is a widespread response from schools and partnership groups confirming that inclusion is now well defined in policy and strategy within the education department, but that at the corporate level practical solutions are yet to be implemented or have yet to show an impact. There are some notable exceptions to this. Elected members have taken corporate responsibility to promote the educational attainment as well as the pastoral support of children in their care and support for looked after children is very good.

140. There have been improvements in support for behaviour and attendance, and in the provision made for pupils who have no school place. Apart from asset management planning, all other functions are performed at least satisfactorily.

The strategy to promote social inclusion

141. The LEA's strategy for promoting social inclusion is satisfactory. However, through necessity, key strategic plans in the education department have been developed in advance of an overall corporate strategy for inclusion. There is now a strong strategy for SEN and inclusion and a developing Children and Young Persons Strategic Partnership between education, social services and health representatives, which seeks to identify and integrate services for vulnerable children and young people. The Children and Young Persons Strategic Partnership has agreed its objectives with its partners, but this important multi-agency group is developing in advance of any agreed corporate overview of inclusion.

142. A multi-agency panel on vulnerable children comprising education, health and social services representatives meets half-termly to review individual cases and agree action. The behaviour support plan is much improved and there are sound systems to track pupils without a school place. Capacity in the education department has been strengthened by the recent appointments of a social inclusion manager and an exclusions and reintegration officer. An adviser for inclusive education is to be appointed from September 2003. Data have been improved recently to identify and monitor the performance of the lowest attaining pupils. Whilst there has been a significant fall in the number of permanent exclusions from schools in 2002/2003, reversing an earlier trend, there has been a recent large rise in the number of fixed-term exclusions. While there are good quality data available to the LEA on social inclusion, the analysis and application of the data are underdeveloped.

Recommendations

In order to improve the strategy to promote social inclusion:

- define and agree in consultation with all key partners, including the local strategic partnership, the key corporate objectives for social inclusion so that existing and developing departmental and multi-agency work for inclusion is linked coherently together; and
- improve the integration, analysis and application of data now available on all aspects of social inclusion so that trends can be identified quickly and the targeting of support improved.

The supply of school places

143. Swindon's effectiveness in the planning of school places was poor at the time of the previous inspection. The LEA has made good progress in this area and planning is now satisfactory.

144. The draft school organisation plan for 2003/2008 is much improved and contains a useful summary of the issues. The LEA is beginning to integrate school organisation planning with school standards and asset management planning through sharing information and joint planning. For example, the planned removal of temporary classrooms will reduce surplus places as well as repairs and maintenance liabilities. Rightly, given the complex picture across the borough of areas of falling demand, and others where housing developments are planned, the roll forecasts have been improved to provide more realistic measures of the demand arising from new housing. Plans to meet the increased need for places as a result of planned housing development in the south of the town are not yet in the school organisation plan.

145. The school organisation committee did not meet regularly in 2002 and is not perceived by all members to be wholly independent of the council. The committee is not sufficiently strategic in its operation: an objection to a proposal to open a new primary school led to its referral to the adjudicator, and caused unnecessary delay and increased costs. The LEA has organised seminars for the committee on the new school organisation plan.

146. In January 2003, there were no secondary schools with more than 25 per cent surplus places. However, there were eight primary schools above this figure, mostly located in the west and centre of Swindon town, where the under-11 population is projected to continue to decrease. The LEA has developed a clear strategy for the removal of surplus places in primary schools, concentrating on those with over 25 per cent. The target is to reduce the overall level of surplus places to less than ten per cent by January 2004 by removing temporary accommodation and amalgamating infant and junior schools. The LEA has sought, through successful consultation, to ensure that primary schools understand the strategy and this has been effective. However, secondary schools are less clear about the LEA's vision for school places across the borough.

147. In the north of the borough, additional school places are needed for a new housing development. A Private Finance Initiative project will build a learning campus, as well as rebuilding an existing secondary school. This is progressing satisfactorily.

Asset management

148. At the time of the previous inspection, the education department's capacity to organise asset management planning was inadequate. Some improvements have been made, but these are at an early stage and asset management planning remains unsatisfactory.

149. Until recently, a lack of capacity within the education department has resulted in insufficient leadership on asset management planning. Capital spending has been focused on providing additional school places and the maintenance of existing buildings has been a low priority. As a result, Swindon has one of the highest repair and maintenance backlogs in England (£1742 per pupil). The 2002/2006-asset management plan did not meet the standards set by the DfES. The condition surveys were reported by schools to be both incomprehensible and inaccurate.

150. Over the past six months the LEA has made reasonable progress in developing strategies to manage its assets by publishing a revised asset management plan and drafting a five-year capital strategy which includes education as a priority. Rightly, this focuses on solutions linked to reducing primary school places and improving school performance. The strategy aims to address the most urgent needs over five years, reduce surplus places by removal of mobile classrooms and replace other mobile accommodation with permanent buildings. The 2003/2007 asset management plan has been approved by the DfES and sufficiency and suitability assessments have been completed satisfactorily. Joint working between education and the corporate property team has improved and there are better links to the corporate asset management plan. Links with the diocesan authorities are good. A new manager has recently been appointed to oversee the education capital programme and asset planning.

151. The LEA has been less effective in bringing schools into the process. Despite a clear commitment to partnership in the revised asset management plan, schools have not yet seen this document, nor the revised condition surveys which are presented in a more accessible way. Headteachers are not aware of the asset management plan priorities and consequently consider that capital expenditure is neither transparent nor fair. Although most have their own asset management plans, these do not take account of the priorities in the authority's plan. A recently established group with headteacher, teacher, governor, diocesan and bursar representatives has the potential to be a key forum for involving schools in asset management planning. Because of a long period of uncertainty and a complex pattern of demand for school places, it will take some time to regain the confidence of schools in the asset management planning process.

152. Swindon has recently identified the preferred bidders for a £58 million Private Finance Initiative project to develop new schools in the north of the borough. The project is on schedule. School representatives have been involved in an advisory capacity, but the involvement of education managers in the project has been inconsistent, largely because of discontinuity of staffing. The timing and specification of the project have needed to be reviewed in light of a revision of the roll forecasts for the northern sector. In the view of an enhanced capital programme, a large Private Finance Initiative and the need to work more closely with schools, it is not clear that there is sufficient capacity within the LEA to meet these diverse demands.

Recommendations**In order to improve the asset management planning process:**

- ensure the LEA has sufficient capacity to work more closely with schools as well as to deliver both an enhanced capital programme and a large Private Finance Initiative project;
 - ensure that all schools have asset management plans that take account of the LEA's priorities and their school development plans; and
- monitor the progress against schools' asset management plans.

Admissions

153. Admissions arrangements were satisfactory at the time of the last inspection and remain so. The links between admissions, school place planning and asset management planning have been strengthened by the creation of one team dealing with all issues. The team has been augmented by a new management post for admissions and has had useful training on the management and use of information.

154. The new guide for admissions satisfactorily covers all of the LEA's primary and secondary schools and usefully includes a secondary school in Wiltshire which admits pupils from Swindon. However, it does not include statistics on appeals or sufficient information on arrangements for admission of vulnerable pupils such as looked after children and those with special educational needs. Co-ordination of admissions has improved. Secondary schools, including the school in Wiltshire, now have a common date for offering places to parents, and arrangements are in place to comply with the new Code of Practice by 2005. As a result, elected members report a reduction in the number of parents contacting them about secondary school places and the number of appeals has dropped.

155. The admissions criteria are simple and clear, based on designated areas for primary schools and, for secondary schools, on linked primary schools. The LEA is currently consulting on the introduction of designated areas for secondary schools in 2004 to reduce movement between primary schools in Key Stage 2. The proposed change is supported generally by schools and the dioceses. A high proportion of parents (97.4 per cent) gain their first preference of secondary schools. Appeals are dealt with in a timely fashion, although a majority are successful.

156. The admissions forum, chaired by a headteacher, functions well and has contributed to the improved co-ordination of admission arrangements. Liaison with neighbouring authorities and the dioceses is good.

157. Mid-year admissions to secondary schools are a weakness, given the low level of surplus places in the sector. There is no agreed protocol between schools for mid-year admissions, and community schools consider that they admit the majority of such pupils. Schools are critical of inaccurate information on available places and consider that advice from admissions officers is not always consistent.

Provision of education for pupils who have no school place

158. Provision for pupils who have no school place was unsatisfactory at the time of the last inspection, but it has improved and is now satisfactory. A new post of manager for social inclusion has been created to integrate the work of a range of services. The recommendations made in the previous inspection report have been addressed. The hours of tuition provided are now satisfactory. The number of pupils without a school place has fallen since 2001 and the allocation of places or support is made by panels that include headteachers. Criteria for admission, referral procedures and the costs of places have been published. Value for money provided by the service is satisfactory

159. The relatively large pupil referral unit provides, in various locations, the management for a range of services for pupils who have no school place, including provision for permanently excluded pupils, anxious and vulnerable pupils, hospital teaching support, home tuition and tuition for pregnant schoolgirls. This was inspected by Ofsted in 2001, and was reported as having consistently good quality of teaching; pupils were judged to be making good progress.

160. A register is maintained of pupils at risk of exclusion, and the progress of these pupils is tracked. Pupils permanently excluded from school receive the stipulated 25 hours of tuition per week, and this provision has been extended to the anxious and vulnerable pupils on the roll of the pupil referral unit. The number of pupils receiving home tuition has fallen sharply and the creation of teaching groups has allowed full-time tuition to be made available. Provision for pupils with medical problems and for pregnant schoolgirls is highly satisfactory. Girls in the latter group make good progress; four of the seven girls leaving in 2002 went on to full-time further education and another to full-time training. The progress and attainment of pupils educated otherwise than at school are monitored satisfactorily.

161. Reintegration rates are low compared with those in similar authorities and nationally. The fall in the number of permanent exclusions at Key Stage 3 has allowed the operation of a 'fresh start' programme in which some Key Stage 2 pupils at risk of exclusion spend some time in the pupil referral unit and some time supported in their school. In the secondary phase, there have been five reintegrations in the 2002/2003 year and a similar number in the previous year. Headteachers and the LEA are currently discussing a protocol for reintegration.

162. The LEA has improved its data and sound systems are in place to identify and track pupils who are without a school place. However, the data to show all aspects of provision are not readily available in one source and this makes it difficult to analyse trends quickly.

Attendance

163. Support for attendance was highly satisfactory at the time of the last inspection and is now good. The LEA attendance policy is clear, and gives good guidance to schools in managing attendance. The council has a local public service agreement in which attendance is to be improved by ten per cent above the targets already set in the EDP. These local public service agreement targets are challenging, but should be achievable.

164. Attendance rates have been improving faster in both primary and secondary schools than in similar authorities and nationally. Attendance in primary schools is in line with that found in similar authorities and nationally and unauthorised absence is below national levels. The LEA identifies authorised absence as the aspect for further improvement in this phase. Attendance in secondary schools has improved and is in line with similar authorities and that found nationally. Unauthorised absence in secondary schools is in line with the national level.

165. The education welfare service supports clusters of schools. A service level agreement sets out service standards, but no funding is devolved to schools. Secondary schools agree targets for attendance and supply data on attendance to the LEA every half term, from which the time of the education welfare officers is directed to specific needs. This is an effective and efficient system. Attendance targets are not agreed with primary schools and data are only available via the annual return. This is recognised as an area for improvement and there are plans to obtain more regular data from primary schools as part of the strategy for meeting the targets in the local public service agreement.

166. The LEA uses the full range of legal powers. It is piloting the use of the national system of giving a caution as a formal warning before embarking on prosecution. There is good liaison with the police, who assist in truancy sweeps. Three quarters of those children stopped in the December sweep were accompanied by their parents. The council encourages good attendance through an annual award scheme.

Behaviour support

167. The strategy to improve behaviour in schools was unsatisfactory at the time of the last inspection. Support for behaviour is now satisfactory. The behaviour support plan is much improved and is linked to the special educational needs and inclusion strategy. The plan has clear targets and is realistic in its objectives. It is a comprehensive document, outlining the range of support available, the routes of referral, the sources of training and the costs of provision. Recommendations made in the previous report have been addressed. There is a wide range of provision available through the behaviour support teams and the pupil referral unit, and there are two special schools for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties. The pattern for future support is included in current special educational needs and inclusion review.

168. Permanent exclusions of pupils from primary schools are below the levels found in similar authorities and nationally. The primary behaviour support team gives good support through early intervention and assists agreed moves of pupils between schools. Permanent exclusions of pupils from secondary schools are in line with levels found in similar authorities and nationally. There has been a sharp reduction in the number of permanent exclusions in 2002/2003, reversing an earlier rising trend. The rapid response scheme at Key Stage 3, operated by the educational psychology service, has had a significant effect in reducing permanent exclusions. There has also been a reduction in the number of permanent exclusions of minority ethnic pupils and the length of fixed-term exclusions for these pupils is now close to the LEA average. Pupils at risk of exclusion are identified and monitored by an 'at risk' panel in order to target support. Management of the support for behaviour has been strengthened by the appointment, in November 2002, of an officer for exclusions and

reintegration. A behaviour strategy forum, comprising officers and headteachers, has been established to advise on behaviour support and development.

169. There are many projects on which the LEA is working with schools to support their capacity to manage behaviour. These support projects have not yet been evaluated in order to concentrate expertise and resource on strategies which can have the greatest impact on reversing this trend.

170. The database of those excluded, or at risk of exclusion, is not yet sufficiently comprehensive. There is a wide range of data available, but all available information has not yet been drawn together, and so details such as the reasons for exclusion, the existence of a personal support plan and the support and action taken in each case are not routinely collected into one source. As a result, while a recent large rise in fixed-term exclusions in both primary and secondary phases has been identified by the LEA, there has not yet been a detailed analysis of the data to direct available support more rapidly and effectively.

Health, safety, welfare and child protection

171. The procedures for health, safety, welfare and child protection were satisfactory at the time of the last inspection and remain so. The previous recommendation has been addressed and a database of designated teachers for child protection and their training is now maintained. This shows that each school has a designated teacher for child protection, but not all of these teachers have taken the opportunity to update their training within the last two years.

172. Revised multi-agency procedures for child protection were issued in 2002 and updated in 2003. There is a protocol between the education and social services departments on the notification of pupils not attending school, in order to meet the recommendations of the Victoria Climbié enquiry. There is also a protocol between the education department and the police on procedures for reported cases of bullying.

173. In 2001, the area child protection committee was merged into a vulnerable persons committee to cover the needs of all vulnerable children and adults. This arrangement has proved cumbersome and the area child protection committee is being re-established. The LEA has senior representation on this committee.

174. There are regular health and safety audits in schools that include risk assessment. Health and safety reports are presented to the education partnership board. Guidance on outdoor visits was revised in 2002 and is being reviewed again following further guidance from the Department for Education and Skills.

Looked after children

175. Support for looked after children and the priority given to corporate parenting were good at the time of the last inspection. Support is now very good. There is good guidance for elected members on corporate parenting and a full, but accessible, guide for carers on the health and education of looked after children. A comprehensive user's manual on looked after children includes the list of designated teachers and personal advisers and also provides helpful advice on personal education plans.

176. There is a good linkage of the plans for looked after children between the education department and other departments and agencies. All looked after children have personal education plans within three months of placement and these are reviewed every six months. Targets for the attainment of looked after children are contained in the EDP 2 and support is built into the priorities. Eighty-four percent of the children achieved at least one GCSE grade in 2002, and ten per cent achieved five A*-C grades, well above the levels in similar authorities and nationally. The targets set are challenging. Designated teachers receive useful training in which the attainment of the children is a key priority.

177. In 2002, a joint appointment by the education and social services departments of an adviser for looked after children has strengthened this work further. This is an imaginative and effective use of funding sources across departments. There is a part-time teacher who will be joined by a further part-time appointment in September. Their work concentrates upon attendance, those at risk of exclusion, and attainment, particularly at the points of national assessment.

178. There are good data available on looked after children, including their predicted grades and progress. Support is targeted as a result of data analysis. Regular, comprehensive reports are made to the three elected members who devote considerable effort to the role of children's champions. There are termly newsletters dealing with support for looked after children.

Measures to combat racism

179. The LEA's work on combating racism was highly satisfactory at the time of the last inspection and remains so.

180. Guidelines were produced for schools following the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence and a race equality scheme was published in 2002. All council departments produce an annual action plan for the equalities task group, which is the steering group for all race and equality issues in the council. Training has been provided for officers and members.

181. All schools have provided returns on racial incidents and these are included within corporate monitoring reports. There is a detailed database held on such incidents that records the action taken in each case. Usefully, a sample policy has been provided to help headteachers and governors formulate their own policy to promote racial equality. Advice on race and equality issues in the curriculum and guidance on raising the attainment of minority ethnic pupils have been provided to schools by the diversity and ethnic minority achievement service.

Section 5: Corporate issues

Introduction to corporate issues

182. The clarity and coherence of Swindon's corporate plans and its procedures for implementing and evaluating the impact of corporate services on education were poor at the time of the last inspection. Despite some improvement in the quality of strategic planning for education, corporate planning, implementing plans and the evaluation of the impact of corporate services on education remain unsatisfactory.

183. Following the last inspection, it was agreed that intervention was necessary in the form of a strategic partner for the delivery of school-related services, as well as an education partnership board to receive advice from the strategic partner and to make recommendations to the council. The partnership has been successful in providing the council with clear advice and guidance in areas for which it is responsible. The LEA has made highly satisfactory progress in addressing many of the issues and recommendations from the inspection. There has been a significant investment in education and further financial commitments are being agreed as part of a medium-term funding strategy. Trust and mutual respect between schools and the education leadership team are growing, although it is still too early to see the full effects of newly developed policies and strategies.

184. Significant weaknesses remain. The council's priorities, and within these the part played by education, are not well articulated, communicated or understood by officers, elected members and schools. The newly developing level of trust from schools in the work of the education department does not extend to partnership working with some officers from across the council or with elected members, beyond those on the education partnership board. In particular, there is still limited confidence in the council's policy framework and strategies.

Corporate planning

185. Corporate planning is unsatisfactory. Elected members are committed to improving education, and there has been significant financial investment in building the capacity of the LEA and in increasing school budgets. The main weaknesses relate to a planning system where too many actions have been planned in isolation from one another and where corporate plans do not capitalise on improved strategic planning in education.

186. The council and the new chief executive officer recognise the current weaknesses. A corporate planning cycle, in the embryonic stages of development, is intended to place effective corporate governance at the heart of change. At the centre of developments is the draft corporate plan. This, together with the Best Value Performance Plan and a medium-term service plan, is designed to demonstrate how the council aims to meet the needs of the wider community, as outlined in a community strategy which is yet to be agreed.

187. Five key themes of 'economy', 'environment', 'health and care', 'learning and creativity' and 'safety' are considered central to improvement. Education features most strongly within 'learning and creativity', a theme which has several strategic aims, including helping all pupils to get more out of school by improving their results. Despite some clear

intentions, the educational aspirations remain too general and, as such, are not easily transferable into measurable long- and short-term targets against which performance and progress can be measured and budget priorities decided. Corporate plans do not build sufficiently on either the strategic plan for education or the local public service agreement.

Recommendations

In order to ensure that corporate planning supports the work of the education department:

- articulate in corporate plans, the priorities for education and how the council intends to achieve its objectives; and
- ensure elected members, officers, schools and other partners and stakeholders understand their respective roles and responsibilities in delivering the council's priorities for education.

188. Planning within the education department is developing satisfactorily. The new strategic plan for education is built upon a thorough audit of performance and provides a link between the council's aspirations and education service plans. The plan reflects clear priorities, targets and responsibilities and provides a sound framework for planning across the department. The department is, however, at an early stage in establishing a secure framework for planning to align business, team and individual plans with strategic plans, although some sound foundations for this have been laid. In general, service plans vary in the extent and manner to which they relate to corporate objectives, make financial implications clear and include focused and measurable targets and success criteria. Service planning for the school improvement services is inadequate and planning for the second year of the EDP 2 is uneven in quality. Procedures to monitor service plans are satisfactory, but the evaluation of service performance is not embedded firmly. Insufficient use is made of the wealth of data available to evaluate the success of activities, to make decisions about sufficiency of staffing and resources or to realign the work of services towards new or key priorities.

Recommendations

In order to develop service planning and sharpen the evaluation of service performance:

- make targets within service plans clearer and criteria for success more precise;
- improve the strategic use made of the wealth of performance and other data available; and
- establish regular and clear evaluations of the effectiveness of the implementation of service plans.

189. The implementation and evaluation of education and other council plans, when taken together, are unsatisfactory overall. The monitoring of progress against the strategic plan for education and the post-Ofsted action plan is highly satisfactory and lines of accountability are clear. Regular reports are provided for the education partnership board and more recently for the scrutiny education task group. By contrast, the implementation of corporate plans

remains poor and is constrained severely by the lack of precision and coherence in corporate planning. The council's planning model seeks to integrate service and financial planning frameworks, but this is in the very early stages of development and the two processes are not yet sufficiently well integrated. There is a system of review against some key performance indicators, and consistency across services is encouraged through monthly reports to the board of directors and quarterly progress reports, but these arrangements are in the early stages of development.

Decision making

190. The speed, transparency and effectiveness of decision making for the education service are now satisfactory. They were poor at the time of the last inspection. Schools had lost confidence in the council's approach to consulting, planning and reviewing the education budget. There has been significant progress since the last inspection to address serious weaknesses.

191. The framework for making decisions is now clear and understood. An appropriate range of consultative and management groups is in place, including groups for asset management planning, information and communication technology, formula funding and a cross-phase group of headteachers. Schools acknowledge that consultation has improved. They welcome the greater transparency in education decision making and the increased involvement of headteachers and governors in shaping policy and making recommendations for change. The tensions and concerns previously reported are gradually being dispelled. The role played by the education partnership board has been fundamental to successful and appropriate decision making. The independent chair of the partnership board brings a wealth of experience and expertise to the post and has helped establish the credibility of the partnership. The three political parties represented on the partnership group act as a conduit to the political groups, although current systems of providing for wider elected member involvement and for raising their general awareness of educational issues are in need of review and development.

Recommendations

In order to improve the relationships between elected members and schools:

- refine and develop the systems for raising the awareness of educational issues by a wider group of elected members; and
- without undermining current contractual arrangements, ensure that elected members are involved at a suitable strategic level, especially through scrutinising and challenging the performance of education services.

192. Schools have very limited confidence in the council's ability to make appropriate decisions without the additional security afforded by the present contractual arrangements. Council performance is still regarded as poor, although there is some acknowledgement and appreciation of the decision made by the council (and supported by all political parties) to meet budget targets and to pass on all funds intended for schools.

193. In broad terms, the council's financial strategy has provided sufficient funding for key strategic educational priorities. The allocation of revenue and capital funding to schools is transparent and schools understand the educational rationale behind the school funding formula.

Leadership of elected members and officers

194. The quality of **leadership given by elected members** was very poor at the time of the previous inspection. Elected members had not secured the trust and confidence of schools and were not viewed as supportive. They were seen to have a well-intentioned desire to understand education, but had not taken a sufficient overview or developed enough formal scrutiny at committee level. The leadership provided by elected members has improved but is still unsatisfactory. The main weaknesses, which are acknowledged, relate to the procedures for democratic scrutiny.

195. Those elected members who work most closely with the education partnership board have a secure knowledge and understanding of educational issues. The leaders of the political parties demonstrate a continuing willingness to work together for the benefit of children and young people within the borough. A sense of the importance of education is reflected in the recent financial investment and commitment, but this has yet to be translated into clear and agreed targets and objectives within corporate plans and, more particularly, within the community strategy. Those councillors on the scrutiny education task group are only gradually gaining the skills and knowledge needed for successful scrutiny, and procedures are well behind those of other councils. There is currently a lack of understanding within the scrutiny education task group of its role in relation to that of the education partnership board and the policy commissions.

Recommendation

In order to improve the effectiveness of the scrutiny process:

- clarify the role of the various scrutiny groups in relation to other fora such as the education partnership board and the policy commissions.

196. Relationships between senior officers and elected members are satisfactory. The council receives highly satisfactory advice from officers, the strategic partner and the partnership board. It is recognised, however, that the quality and sufficiency of information provided for non-executive members and for scrutiny need to be monitored and reviewed to prevent elected members from becoming overwhelmed with data and information.

197. At this stage, the **leadership provided by new senior officers** is satisfactory. The new educational leadership team has only been fully operational for six months and it has already won much goodwill and support from schools and other partners. It is too soon for senior managers to have demonstrated a sustained effect, but it is already clear that they, and especially the director of education, have high expectations and a determination to succeed.

198. Schools and other partners welcome the new appointments within the education leadership team and look forward to a period of stability and continued growth. Satisfactory progress has been made at senior officer level in building procedures that enable schools and

other partners to influence the work of the LEA and to shape policy. As a consequence relationships are productive and improving. Schools are cautiously optimistic about immediate future developments.

Partnership

199. The LEA's arrangements for partnership work were satisfactory at the time of the previous inspection and remain so. However, the council has been slow to develop the local strategic partnership needed to strengthen and accelerate progress in this area.

200. The education department has built positive relationships with the police through work on community safety, and through strategies to reduce youth crime and to combat drug and alcohol abuse. There is good liaison with social services and health for supporting pupils with special educational needs and those children and young people with complex, emotional and behavioural difficulties. The partnership with the diocesan authorities is strong and there are appropriate structures for the involvement of minority ethnic community groups. Jointly funded posts have helped raise the attainment of looked after children.

Support for early years

201. In its support for early years, the LEA has close and effective links with the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP), although there have been disruptions in staffing, such as the LEA's current lack of an early years adviser. The partnership's quality assurance framework fits well with the self-evaluation procedures used by the LEA in schools. The LEA's advisory teachers and EYDCP development workers help providers to implement their development plans. The LEA and partnership have also co-operated on the establishment of a foundation stage profile that links with profiles at later key stages and establishes a benchmark for baseline attainment.

202. The LEA and partnership collaborate to provide a wide range of training and they work closely together to develop a structure of early years provision within Swindon. The EYDCP supports the education department's priority for inclusion. The LEA has supported non-maintained settings in increasing the number of childcare places in line with the partnership's plan. In maintained settings, approval has been obtained to develop a school as an early years excellence centre with childcare provision.

Support for 14 -19 education

203. The LEA has not yet written a clear policy for 14-19 education but it has appointed a 14-19 strategy manager, jointly funded by the Learning and Skills Council, who plays an active part in the lifelong learning partnership. The partnership is strong, comprehensive and inclusive. It was established in September 2001, and has a wide range of membership, including all Swindon secondary schools. As only two of the ten secondary schools have sixth forms, the LEA has sensibly concentrated initially on provision for 14-16 year-olds.

However, there is an awareness that a strong partnership, with an effective contribution from the LEA, is essential for good post-16 provision.

204. All the secondary schools now offer at least one applied GCSE course and plan to broaden their Key Stage 4 curricular provision. The Learning and Skills Council has allocated funds to the partnership for an increased flexibility project, which has enabled 220 Year 10 students from eight secondary schools to study some courses in schools and in the two local further education colleges. For 2003/2004 over 500 students, from all ten secondary schools and representing approximately 20 per cent of the year group, have enrolled for similarly flexible packages of study. The students represent the full range of ability and special schools are becoming increasingly involved. Two secondary schools and both colleges offer Advanced Subsidiary (AS)-level courses for more able students in Year 10 and the partnership also provides a range of special packages for vulnerable and disaffected students.

205. The 14-19 strategy manager is a member of a Learning and Skills Council group that is undertaking a review of all 14-19 provision in Swindon. Gaps and overlaps have been identified and collaborative arrangements are being discussed. The proportion of students progressing to full-time education or training at 16 rose from 68 per cent in 2001 to 71 per cent in 2002. Swindon is, therefore, on course to meet the government target of 80 per cent by 2006.

Appendix 1: Recommendations

This report has made a number of fundamental recommendations which are key to further progress in the LEA. Work should begin on them immediately. They are:

In order to ensure that corporate planning supports the work of the education department:

- articulate in corporate plans, the priorities for education and how the council intends to achieve its objectives; and
- ensure elected members, officers, schools and other partners and stakeholders understand their respective roles and responsibilities in delivering the council's priorities for education.

In order to improve the relationships between elected members and schools:

- refine and develop the systems for raising the awareness of educational issues by a wider group of elected members; and
- without undermining current contractual arrangements, ensure that elected members are involved at a suitable strategic level, especially through scrutinising and challenging the performance of education services.

In order to improve the effectiveness of the scrutiny process:

- clarify the role of the various scrutiny groups in relation to other fora such as the education partnership board and the policy commissions.

In order to improve the strategy to promote social inclusion:

- define and agree, in consultation with all key partners, including the local strategic partnership, the key corporate objectives for social inclusion so that existing and developing departmental and multi-agency work for inclusion is linked coherently together; and
- improve the integration, analysis and application of data now available on all aspects of social inclusion so that trends can be identified quickly and the targeting of support improved.

In order to develop service planning and sharpen the evaluation of service performance:

- make targets within service plans clearer and criteria for success more precise;
- improve the strategic use made of the wealth of performance and other data available; and
- establish regular and clear evaluations of the effectiveness of the implementation of

service plans.

In order to improve the effectiveness of EDP 2:

- improve the links between priorities, purposes of programmes, actions and success criteria;
- ensure sharper details are provided for activities and actions;
- clarify procedures for monitoring and evaluating the plan; and
- identify clear timescales for actions and milestones for judging success against which the plan can be monitored and evaluated.

In order to improve the asset management planning process:

- ensure the LEA has sufficient capacity to work more closely with schools as well as to deliver both an enhanced capital programme and a large Private Finance Initiative project;
- ensure that all schools have asset management plans, that take account of the LEA's priorities and their school development plans; and
- monitor the progress against schools' asset management plans.

In order to improve the support for information and communication technology:

- devise and implement effective systems of monitoring and evaluation in order to secure accurate knowledge of primary schools' progress and the levels of their pupils' attainment in ICT; and
- provide support to primary schools, targeted to their identified needs.

The report also makes the following recommendations:

In order to reduce underspending by primary and special schools:

- give guidance to headteachers and governors on the appropriate level of school reserves; and
- offer challenge to schools with the highest levels of uncommitted surpluses.

In order to improve the support for school leadership and management:

- work with schools to produce an acceptable framework for benchmarking performance to establish their confidence in sharing and using comparative data.

In order to improve the support for gifted and talented pupils:

- include support for gifted and talented pupils within the EDP 2.

In order to improve the quality of the cleaning, grounds maintenance and catering services to schools:

- strengthen the supervision of staff in schools and ensure they are aware of the service standards to which they are working.

Appendix 2: Record of Judgement Recording Statements for the inspection

No.	Required Inspection Judgement	Grade	NI
SECTION 1 SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY			
1	The socio-economic context of the LEA	3	
2	The performance of schools	5	
3	Funding, including the co-ordination of external funding	5	
4	The LEA's strategy for school improvement including the EDP and EiC	4	
5	The progress on implementing the LEA's strategy for school improvement including the EDP and EiC	4	
6	The extent to which the LEA targets its resources on priorities	4	
7	The extent to which the LEA has in place effective strategies to promote continuous improvement including Best Value	4	
SECTION 2 SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT			
8	The extent to which the LEA has defined monitoring, challenge, and intervention and shared those understandings with schools	4	
9	The extent to which the LEA's support to schools is focused on areas of greatest need	3	
10	The effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring schools and challenging them to improve, including the use made of performance data	3	NI
11	The effectiveness of LEA identification of and intervention in under-performing schools	4	
12	Support to schools for raising standards in Literacy	2	NI
13	Support to schools for raising standards in Numeracy	2	
14	Support to schools for raising standards in and the curriculum use of information and communications technology	6	
15	Support to schools for raising standards at Key Stage 3	3	
16	Support to schools in raising standards of ethnic minority and Traveller children including the effective deployment of the ethnic minority and Traveller achievement grants	3	NI
17	Support to schools for gifted and talented pupils	4	

18	Support for school leadership and management including support for schools effort to achieve Best Value	4	
19	Support to school governors	2	NI
20	The effectiveness of its services to support school management	4	
20a	Financial services	2	NI
No.	Required Inspection Judgement	Grade	
20b	Human resources	3	NI
20c	Property services	6	
20d	Services for ICT in school administration	4	
20e	Cleaning and caretaking	4	
20f	Grounds maintenance	4	
20g	Catering	4	
21	The extent to which the LEA is successful in assuring the supply and quality of teachers	4	
22	The effectiveness of the leadership of services to support school improvement	4	
23	The effectiveness of the deployment of staff to support school improvement	4	
24	The effectiveness of strategic planning of services to support school improvement	5	
25	The effectiveness of the performance management of services to support school improvement	4	
26	The standard of expertise of staff to support school improvement	4	
27	The effectiveness of services to school improvement	4	
28	Value for money of services to support school improvement	4	
SECTION 3 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS			
29	The effectiveness of the LEA's strategy for SEN	4	
30	The effectiveness of the LEA in taking steps to meet its statutory obligations in respect of SEN	3	
31	The effectiveness of the LEA in exercising its SEN functions to support school improvement	4	

32	The extent to which the LEA has exercised its SEN functions to meet the requirements of value for money	4	
SECTION 4 PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION			
33	The overall effectiveness of the LEA in promoting social inclusion	4	
34	The effectiveness of the LEA in relation to the provision of school places	4	
35	The effectiveness of the LEA in discharging asset management planning	5	
36	The effectiveness of the LEA in relation to admissions to schools	4	
37	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to provision for pupils who have no school place	4	
No.	Required Inspection Judgement	Grade	
38	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to school attendance	2	
39	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to behaviour at school	4	
40	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to health and safety, welfare and child protection	4	
41	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to children in public care	1	
42	The effectiveness of the LEA in combating racism	3	
SECTION 5 CORPORATE ISSUES			
43	The clarity, consistency, coherence and feasibility of corporate plans	5	
44	The effectiveness of the procedures for implementing and evaluating corporate plans	5	
45	The speed, transparency and effectiveness of decision-making (particularly financial decision-making)	4	
46	The quality of leadership provided by elected members	5	
47	The quality of the leadership provided by senior officers	4	
48	The quality of advice given to elected members	3	
49	The effectiveness of the co-ordination of actions in support of priorities involving collaboration between several agencies	4	

OVERALL JUDGEMENTS			
50	The progress made by the LEA overall	3	
51	The LEA's capacity for further improvement and to address the recommendations of the inspection	4	
52	The overall effectiveness of the LEA	4	

JRS numerical judgements are allocated on a 1 to 7 point scale:

- Grade 1 – Very good
- Grade 2 – Good
- Grade 3 – Highly satisfactory
- Grade 4 – Satisfactory
- Grade 5 – Unsatisfactory
- Grade 6 – Poor, significant weaknesses
- Grade 7 – Very poor, fails to provide effective support to schools