

Inspection report
SUNDERLAND
Local Education Authority

Date of inspection: January 2003

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Basic information

Name of LEA: Sunderland Local Education Authority

Address of LEA: The Civic Centre
Sunderland
SR2 7DN

Lead inspector of inspection: Douglas Thorburn HMI

Introduction

1. This inspection of Sunderland local education authority (LEA) was carried out by Ofsted in conjunction with the Audit Commission under section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The inspection used the *Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities (December 2001)*. The inspection focused on the effectiveness of the LEA's work to support school improvement. The inspection also took account of the Local Government Act 1999, insofar as it relates to work undertaken by the LEA on Best Value.

2. The inspection was based on a range of material, which included self-evaluation undertaken by the LEA, and data, some of which was provided by the LEA. That material also included school inspection information; HMI monitoring reports; audit reports; documentation from, and discussions with, LEA officers and members; focus groups of headteachers and governors; staff in other departments at that local authority; and diocesan representatives. Other agencies and LEA partners submitted written evidence of participation and joint working or participated in discussions. In addition, the inspection team considered the earlier Ofsted/Audit Commission report on this LEA (published in 1998). A questionnaire, seeking views on aspects of the work of the LEA, was circulated to all schools, and its results were considered by the inspection team. The response rate to the questionnaire was 70 per cent.

3. For each inspected function of the LEA, an inspection team makes a judgement which is converted into a numerical grade. An inspection team may make up to 52 key inspection judgements. An inspection judgement is made against criteria for each inspected function of the LEA. These criteria, (and the guidance notes on functions of an LEA that may be inspected by Ofsted), 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 numeric grade represents. Judgements on inspected functions of an LEA are made during the inspection of the LEA and indicate the effectiveness of the LEA's performance of individual functions at the time of the inspection. The numeric grades awarded by the inspection team complement the areas of the report which comment on the individual functions scrutinised on this inspection, and, as such, must be considered in the light of those comments.

4. Some of the grades are used in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment profile (CPA) 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 annual assessment.

5. The CPA for the education service takes account of the performance of several aspects of the local service, including pre-school and adult education. The CPA 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 etc, whereas this report focuses on the local authority's work to support school improvement.

Commentary

6. The City of Sunderland suffers much economic disadvantage. Although unemployment has fallen in recent years, it is still above the national rate. There are high levels of ill health in the city. Primary school rolls are falling as a result of demographic change. Pupils make good progress in nursery schools and nursery or reception classes. However, in 2002 they broadly performed below national averages in National Curriculum tests and GCSE, though standards are generally rising in line with or faster than the national rate of improvement. The proportion of young people entering full-time education at 16 is below the national average.

7. The previous inspection of the LEA in 1998 found it to be generally satisfactory, but with some significant issues to be tackled, particularly in its strategy for school improvement.

8. This inspection has found that poor progress has been made since 1998. The LEA has failed to implement some of the recommendations of the 1998 report, and it took too long to implement others. Moreover, it has been slow to catch up with the new demands made on LEAs over this period. It has been successful in some aspects, but these have not amounted to general improvement. However, there has been some progress recently: under the leadership of a new director of education, it is embarking on a wide-ranging programme of change.

9. The LEA's support to schools is currently unsatisfactory. There are some strengths, generally the result of the good work of particular officers within the education directorate or of the contributions made by other directorates, such as social services or community and cultural services. However, the authority still fails to achieve a consistent level of quality in service provision. Its commitment to achieving continuous improvement has been weak.

Strengths

There are particular strengths in:

- corporate planning;
- the quality of advice now given to elected council members;
- intervention in under-performing schools;
- provision for health and safety, welfare and child protection;
- support for information and communication technology in the curriculum;
- human resources services;
- asset management planning; and
- catering provision.

Weaknesses

Weaknesses have developed in:

- the strategy for special educational needs;
 - support for school improvement in special educational needs;
 - provision for pupils who have no school place; and
 - an aspect of the allocation of resources to priorities.
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There are also weaknesses in the following aspects, not previously inspected:

- the implementation and evaluation of corporate plans;
- strategies to promote continuous improvement;
- progress on implementing the strategy for school improvement;
- strategies for services to support school management;
- the value for money provided in relation to special educational needs;
- support for behaviour; and
- effectiveness in combating racism.

10. Not only do these weaknesses outnumber the strengths, but a number are of great significance, particularly those relating to strategic thinking and evaluation. While other aspects of the council have moved forward, the education directorate has tended to lag behind. The progress made by this directorate was subject to insufficient scrutiny by the corporate centre. It has developed its work with partners reasonably well, but too many of its own developments have been subject to delay, or have been born among some confusion. The education directorate does not have a good record in planning and seeing new projects through efficiently. Senior officers have sometimes taken their eyes off the ball. Too much has been unsystematic. Nursery and primary schools have rightly been concerned about the extent to which, with the coming of the Excellence in Cities initiative, the LEA has tended to focus on secondary education.

11. Change has now started and improvements have already begun. A new director of education has been in place for about six months and the senior management capacity of the directorate has been increased. A serious attempt is being made to create clarity in the authority's work. Many of the weaknesses have been recognised, in some cases before this inspection commenced, by the new political leadership, the corporate centre and the new director of education. The LEA's objectives are now clear. Performance management and evaluation are improving and staff development is underway. Many important, and sometimes innovative, improvement strategies are being developed. The LEA has started to move forward again.

12. The 2002 comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) judged education's performance to be two star (the second highest category). However, this assessment was arrived at partly on the basis of the 1998 inspection, since when the LEA has declined. CPA rated the LEA's capacity to improve as three star (the highest category) but this was strongly affected by improvements in schools' performance, and the quality of early years settings. This inspection finds that the LEA's capacity to improve its education service is in fact much less secure than CPA suggested. This is because of the history of weakness in the LEA's strategic management, the lack of a culture throughout the education directorate that emphasises efficiency and effectiveness, and the fact that many recent reforms have yet to be embedded in the LEA's work.

13. This is currently an unsatisfactory LEA, which has made poor progress since its first inspection. However, the focused and vigorous new management is demonstrating a clearer sense of direction, though it will have to ensure that it retains the support of all staff if the LEA is to continue to move forward. Already, there are indications that education directorate staff are aware of the need for change, and there are examples of positive

developments within the directorate on which to build. Moreover, it appears likely that schools and partners will be supportive, as they have already seen what benefits the new approach promises. The corporate assessment judged that this is an excellent council. That corporate strength, provided that it is better focused than in the past, has the capacity to bring rigorous scrutiny and sensitive support, both of which are needed if improvement is to be achieved. The inspection team's view is that the LEA's capacity to improve is therefore satisfactory.

Section 1: The LEA's strategy for school improvement

Context

14. The City of Sunderland comprises a metropolitan area, the large town of Washington, and many former mining villages surrounded by countryside. Relatively few residents are from minority ethnic groups. There is much deprivation: nearly 40 per cent of residents live in wards in the ten per cent most disadvantaged nationally, and 75 per cent live in the ten per cent of wards nationally that have the worst health record. Unemployment has reduced in recent years, as new businesses have to some extent replaced traditional heavy industry, but it is still above national rates. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is well above the national average in both the primary and the secondary phase. There are about one hundred children of asylum seekers or refugees in Sunderland schools.

15. The city is experiencing a falling population, as a result of a declining birth rate and movement to other areas. The school age population will drop by 15 per cent over the next ten years. The primary sector will take the brunt of this decline, which will affect secondaries in due course.

16. There is a nursery education place for every 3 year-old and 4 year-old whose parent wants one. There are about 49,000 young people in Sunderland's schools. These include ten nursery schools, and 89 primary schools, mostly with a 4-11 age-range. There are 18 secondary schools, of which three have sixth forms. The secondaries are, on average, slightly larger than most nationally, but the recent establishment of one new school will have the effect of reducing the average size. There are eight special schools, of which three have post-16 students, and one pupil referral unit. The Roman Catholic sector is large, numbering 18 schools. A smaller proportion of 16-year olds continues in full-time education than is the case nationally, but a higher proportion enters vocational training.

17. The proportion of primary age pupils with statements of special educational need (SEN) is in line with the national average, but the secondary proportion is above average. The proportion of pupils in special schools is higher than is the case nationally, though it has reduced in recent years.

Performance

18. The overall picture of attainment is that in 2002 Sunderland pupils broadly performed below national averages, but standards are generally rising in line with or faster than the national rate of improvement.

19. Inspections of Sunderland primary schools have shown that pupils' attainment on entry is broadly similar to similar LEAs¹ but below the national average. Nevertheless, in

¹ Sunderland's statistical neighbours are: South Tyneside, Sheffield, Tameside, Stoke on Trent, Newcastle upon Tyne, North Tyneside, Portsmouth, Salford, Gateshead, and Stockton-on-Tees.

2002² pupils' attainment at the end of both Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 was in line with national averages in many respects. The rates of improvement from 1997 to 2001 have been broadly in line with the national improvement, except that the LEA's rate was faster in Key Stage 1 reading but it was slower in Key Stage 2 mathematics.

20. Attainment at secondary level is less good. In 2002, English, mathematics and science standards at Key Stage 3 were all below the national average, although in line with similar authorities. The rates of improvement to 2001, however, were faster than the national rate in all cases, particularly in English and science. The proportion of pupils achieving at least one GCSE pass was in line with the national average in 2002 and above that in similar authorities. However, the average point score at GCSE was below the national average, as was the proportion of pupils achieving five higher grades, though with both measures the results were in line with similar authorities. Nevertheless, the rate of improvement to 2001 was again faster than the national rate in most respects. In 2001 the performance of pupils at the few schools with sixth forms was below the national average and that of similar authorities at AS/A level, but was well above the national average in advanced pre-vocational and vocational subjects.

21. Girls do better than boys in nearly every measure of attainment at primary and secondary level. This is broadly similar to the national picture but, in Sunderland, the gap between girls' and boys' attainment is particularly large in English at Key Stage 3.

22. Pupils' attendance at school is in line with the national average. There is less unauthorised absence from primary schools than the national average; the rate for secondary schools is average. In 2002 exclusions from school were below the national average.

23. There are currently no schools in Sunderland requiring special measures or having serious weaknesses. There are more good or very good primary schools than the national average. The proportion of good or very good secondaries is broadly in line with the national picture. There are indications of further improvements in the management and efficiency in those primary schools that have been inspected twice. In both phases there are relative weaknesses in pupils' learning in some non-core foundation subjects, such as geography or history.

Funding

24. Over the past four years Sunderland has received a Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) allocation for education per pupil that is in line with the averages for metropolitan authorities and its statistical neighbours. SSA per primary pupil in 2002/03 was £2659, in line with its statistical neighbours (£2678) and the metropolitan average (£2668) but below the England average (£2797). Secondary SSA was £3414, compared with statistical neighbours, metropolitan authority and England averages of £3473, £3423 and £3582 respectively.

² 2002 National Curriculum data is as yet unvalidated.

25. Total gross Standards Fund allocations for 2002/03 are somewhat lower than similar authorities at £327 per pupil, compared with £390 for statistical neighbours and £350 for metropolitan authorities. The LEA consistently provides matched funding to enable the full take up of allocated grant. The council has a very good record of attracting other external funding and this will contribute a further £9 million to budgets for the education service during 2002/03. The LEA draws on a wide variety of sources to fund the capital programme.

Funding delegated to schools

	Sunderland £ per pupil	Statistical neighbours £ per pupil	Metropolitan authorities £ per pupil	England £ per pupil
Primary individual schools budget (ISB)	2153	2131	2121	2223
Secondary ISB	2772	2746	2831	2940

Data source: CIPFA Section 52 data 2002/03.

Central spending

	Sunderland £ per pupil	Statistical neighbours £ per pupil	Metropolitan authorities £ per pupil	England £ per pupil
Strategic management	117	140	121	101
School improvement	35	34	28	31
Access	73	98	103	131
SEN	98	150	144	160
Total	355	445	423	452

Data source: CIPFA Section 52 data 2002/03.

Council structure

26. The council has 75 members: 62 are from the Labour Party, 11 from the Conservative Party, and 2 comprise the Liberal Democrat group. The council structure has been modernised since the last inspection. In May 2002 a cabinet was established as the executive body, one member of which holds the portfolio for education and citizenship. One of the six review committees scrutinises executive decisions on education. There are also six area committees, which advise the council on local matters.

27. The council's directorate structure was also reorganised last year. The number of directorates has been reduced, making education one of five. The director of education has corporate responsibility as a member of the executive management team. The education

directorates comprises three services: strategy and performance, quality and development, and access and special educational needs.

The LEA's strategy for school improvement

28. The LEA's strategy for school improvement lacked clarity at the time of the last inspection. The authority had too many priorities for action and they did not form a coherent programme of activity that schools understood. A fundamental recommendation of that inspection was that the LEA should establish a clearer strategy and ensure that schools understand it. That recommendation was echoed in the recent corporate assessment. As a result of very recent improvements, the LEA's school improvement strategy is now satisfactory and schools are increasingly in agreement with its principles and priorities.

29. There is a good focus on shared priorities across the council, which has entered into a local public service agreement (LPSA) with the government since the last inspection. The LPSA has significant implications for the education service, as its targets cover lifelong learning, youth offending, and the health of young people. The education directorate is contributing towards meeting the targets, but so are other directorates, for instance with regard to sports development, the provision of school meals, the use of broadband ICT, and other relevant priorities. These activities, together, form a coherent whole and are likely to provide an improved basis on which schools can work. The corporate team monitors progress on LPSA targets regularly.

30. Excellence in Cities (EiC) has also entered the education scene since the last inspection and the LEA has made a significant contribution to supporting the local partnership, not least by making a heavy commitment of its own senior staffing in the initiative's development period. Secondary schools see EiC as a fundamental means of raising standards, and have made reasonable progress towards EiC targets. The EiC partnership has been vigorous in promoting social inclusion through its use of learning mentors and learning support units, but this has not yet had enough effect on the LEA's overall approach to social inclusion, because of its lack, until now, of a strategic view.

31. The LEA's first submission of its second Education Development Plan (EDP2) in spring 2002 was unsatisfactory. This demonstrated the lack of coherent strategic thinking being experienced in the education directorate at the time. The LEA engaged an external consultant to help prepare a new submission in summer 2002. The revised EDP2 is satisfactory. The school improvement programme is based on a relevant audit of schools' and pupils' performance, justifying the chosen priorities. Activities across all priorities are planned satisfactorily, with attention being given to actions, target groups, timing and responsibilities. However, success criteria are not always clear or consistently quantified.

32. In recent months, the director of education has taken significant steps to clarify further, and to expand, the strategy for school improvement. A statement outlining the LEA's new approach to partnership with schools has been discussed with schools and other stakeholders. It puts a good emphasis on the LEA's commitments to lead schools, but to respect their autonomy, and to act in proportion to the needs of the service. It is entirely in accord with the Code of Practice on LEA-School Relations. Furthermore, the authority has recently embarked on a major initiative, strongly endorsed by the local strategic partnership,

to use support from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund to raise standards in eight schools where they are particularly low. Initial planning work is good. This is a positive indication of the LEA's new-found ability to direct its energies to meet identified needs.

33. At the time of the school survey, in summer 2002, schools broadly found the LEA's priorities and its implementation of them, to be satisfactory. However, primary schools, without the support of EiC, were considerably more critical than is the case nationally. Focus group discussions during this inspection suggested that schools' opinions are shifting and that the LEA's strategy is now viewed more positively.

Implementation of the school improvement strategy

34. The progress made on EDP1 and on monitoring the first year of EDP2, has, on balance, been unsatisfactory.

35. Some progress was made on all of the priorities of EDP1 from 1999 to 2002, and improvements were made in all aspects of pupils' performance. Notable progress was made with information and communication technology (ICT) in the curriculum. There were, though, some weaknesses, as explained below.

36. Pupils' performance in English at Key Stage 2 rose only slightly during this period, and the extent of improvement was less than that of similar authorities or the national trend. The proportion of pupils achieving at least Level 4 in 2002 (72 per cent) was far short of the target agreed with the DfES (85 per cent). This is because Sunderland schools did not maintain the rapid improvement they had made in the period 1996-2000. In the light of this, the 2004 target (86 per cent) is unrealistic, as it will require a rate of improvement over the next two years much more rapid than was achieved even in the period of dramatic progress. Nevertheless, the authority has committed itself, wisely, to reviewing its literacy support strategy in the hope of speeding up improvement. The 2002 results in mathematics (73 per cent) also fell short of the target (80 per cent), and the 2004 target (84 per cent) is daunting and will require improvement almost as fast as has ever been achieved in Sunderland in the last six years.

37. By contrast, the LEA came close to meeting its 2002 GCSE targets and, although the 2004 targets are very demanding, they are realistic, given EiC and other initiatives in place.

38. The LEA's self-evaluation of EDP1 indicates its continuing concern about the performance of particular groups of pupils at Key Stages 3 and 4, despite action in that plan to support them. This inspection reinforces that conclusion: more rapid progress needs to be made in boosting the attainment of certain minority groups, such as looked after children, and pupils of Bangladeshi heritage. Furthermore, some activities of EDP1 concerning pupils with special educational needs (SEN) or with behaviour problems were not implemented successfully.

39. Evaluation of progress on EDP2 is hindered by the lack of precision in the success criteria in use. The early reports of priority scrutiny teams indicate that activities are broadly progressing as planned, but quantitative detail is scant. By contrast, the monitoring undertaken by the sports development team, within another directorate, is precise and very useful, and could inform the monitoring strategies used by the education directorate. The

intended procedures for monitoring EDP2 should have allowed senior officers and elected members to supervise its implementation closely, but there have been delays in putting some monitoring processes in place.

Recommendations

In order to ensure more reliable monitoring of progress:

- establish procedures for monitoring the EDP that involve more use of quantitative analysis;
- establish urgently all the planned systems for evaluating and reporting on progress on the EDP.

The allocation of resources to priorities

40. The previous inspection judged the allocation of resources to priorities to be satisfactory, but drew attention to the extent to which the council's education budgets had consistently been set below SSA. Education spending has been increased and there are good corporate systems for medium term financial planning. However, the allocation of resources is now unsatisfactory because of one particular weakness: many primary schools have built up substantial and growing budget surpluses.

41. Following the criticism in the previous inspection report, the council pledged to bring its education budget up to the level of the education SSA. It has moved toward this target progressively over the past four years, and is planning to achieve this at the start of the 2003/04 financial year. The council has consistently ensured that schools received sufficient funding increases year-on-year to meet commitments, pay increases and cost inflation. It has always met government targets for passing on increases in SSA to schools. Total net expenditure within the local schools budget is £2960 per pupil. This is somewhat below the average for metropolitan authorities (£3048) and statistical neighbours (£3117). The council's aim of supporting children with special needs has not led to planned budget development. Indeed, the total amount spent on SEN (11.9 per cent of the local schools budget) is lower than in other authorities (15.4 per cent in similar LEAs).

42. Sunderland delegates 85.5 per cent of its local schools budget to schools. This is more than the metropolitan district average of 83.3 per cent and the England average of 83.1 per cent. Funding for schools is in line with comparable authorities. Delegated funding for primary schools is very slightly above the average for metropolitan authorities and statistical neighbours; the secondary figure lies between the metropolitan average and the statistical neighbours' average.

43. There is extensive consultation with schools during the annual budget setting process. A schools forum has been established and will hold its first meeting in time to comment on the forthcoming year's budget. The LEA reviewed the funding formula very thoroughly for 2000/01 and it is now constructed on the basis of schools' needs. In developing the formula, the LEA has been able to fund the elements which relate to schools'

fixed costs but has insufficient resources to meet fully the variable elements which relate to pupils' needs. There is good consultation with schools over annual revisions to the formula, with rigorous debate and challenge.

44. Under-fives are funded well within the formula and there is relatively high weighting to Key Stage 1, reflecting the LEA's commitment to younger children and pupils. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) has provided more funding for sixth forms than was previously provided by the LEA. This had the immediate effect of reducing the amount available to the LEA to spend on schools, but the authority has, commendably, managed to find resources to cover the loss without adversely affecting the budget for other key stages for 2002/03 and 2003/04.

45. Of the budgets retained centrally by the LEA, planned expenditure on redundancy and early retirement is above average, as a result of school re-organisations to reduce the number of surplus school places. Budgets for promoting good practice and collaboration in SEN, and expenditure on pupil referral units (PRU) are also above average.

46. Budget making is reasonably accurate in most respects. The major exception in the current year has been that spending on early retirement as a consequence of school re-organisation has been higher than expected. Procedures for granting early retirement in these circumstances have sensibly been tightened as a result and are now robust.

47. The budget for promoting good practice and collaboration in SEN is used for a wider purpose than usual, including supplementary funding for some pupils with SEN who attend mainstream schools. This is not budgeted or allocated in a transparent way. Another weakness concerns recharges for services to the education directorate by other directorates of the council. These are set by the provider, and service level agreements (SLAs) are in place, but there is insufficient scope to negotiate the level of service that is required by the education directorate or the price that is levied. However, despite these weaknesses in budget making, the monitoring of budgets is regular and rigorous with regular reporting to senior managers and councillors.

48. The education directorate maintains a successful, dedicated team to identify and bid for external funding to supplement the main budgets. As a result there are a wide range of extension and extra curricular activities to support the work of schools. A recent positive addition has been the award of £6 million over three years from the neighbourhood renewal fund (NRF) to provide additional funds to enable two secondary and six primary schools to reach the targets set by the government for schools with low attainment. The LEA has a strong, and pro-active, approach to seeking external funding. However, support to schools seeking support to fund their own initiatives is less systematic although it is available on demand.

49. The LEA is rigorous in following up the few schools that have budget deficits and it monitors their recovery plans well. However, many primary schools have accumulated substantial and growing budget surpluses. Seventy-five per cent of primary schools had surpluses of more than 5 per cent last year, and the total surplus as a percentage of the primary delegated budget had by then grown to 8.5 percent. The LEA has raised the issue in meetings with head teachers and governors, but does not have a sufficiently systematic approach to following up schools with large budget surpluses.

*Recommendation***In order to secure better use of resources in schools:**

- undertake systematic challenge to schools with large budget surpluses.

Structures to ensure continuous improvement, including Best Value

50. The previous inspection did not make a judgement on this area. However, the report commented that only limited use was made of quantitative evaluation and there was too much concentration on monitoring the completion of planned tasks and the views of service stakeholders. The LEA's approach to ensuring continuous improvement is now unsatisfactory.

51. The LEA has strong corporate processes for performance management with a good Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) and good links between budgeting and service planning. The council has maintained a focus on service improvement since 1994, refining its approach over the years. However these systems have not been used effectively by the education service to achieve service improvements. The quality of the self-evaluation undertaken by the education directorate for this inspection was variable.

*Recommendation***In order to improve the quality of its self-evaluation:**

- put in place a staff development programme that equips all education directorate officers to undertake self-evaluation rigorously and purposefully.

52. The LEA has made insufficient progress in response to the recommendations of the previous inspection. It produced an action plan but monitoring of the implementation of the action plan by members and officers, both departmentally and corporately, has been ineffective. The LEA asked the external auditor to review progress last summer, four years after the inspection. That review identified five areas of satisfactory progress, but four others where progress had been unsatisfactory.

53. Over the past four years, the LEA has made extensive use of external consultants to provide advice about the quality of its education services and how they might be improved. The desire to gain an objective view of its own provision is laudable. However, the LEA has not always acted promptly on the findings of reviews. The SEN services have been subject to a long series of reviews since 1996, including a Best Value review completed in June 2000. While some progress has been made, certain aspects identified as weak two or more years ago have still not improved significantly. These include establishing a resource allocation system for SEN pupils, speeding up responses from the education psychology service, improving coordination between services, and re-integrating pupils excluded from school. Similarly, response was slow to an important issue about providing a brokerage function for schools, which was raised a year ago in a Best Value review of the school improvement service.

*Recommendation***In order to secure effective improvement of services:**

- evaluate the recommendations of internal reviews, consultants' reports and external inspections and, where they are implemented, require senior officers and councillors to monitor progress.

54. Against a background of all these long-standing weaknesses, performance management arrangements have been sharpened up considerably in recent months, and there are strong indications that this has improved the sense of purpose felt within the directorate. This is overdue, as the fieldwork for this inspection continually encountered confusion and contradictory information. The director of education has recently produced a list of twenty-two key targets against which her own, and the directorate's, performance will be assessed by the chief executive. There are regular monitoring meetings to discuss progress and six monthly reports to the cabinet. Each head of service now has a performance contract and this again is monitored on a twice-yearly basis. This appears to be an effective system but it is not possible to evaluate it properly until a full annual cycle has been completed. There is now, in general, a much more rigorous approach to the use of data and performance information to monitor the work of the department. An urgently needed appointment has been made to a new middle management post, which will increase the authority's capacity to evaluate its own performance.

55. In 2002 the department was successfully re-assessed for Investors in People, after a poor assessment in 2001. The 2002 review indicated that the sense of purpose in the directorate had improved over the last year. Staff were more confident than a year before about the directorate's commitment to the development of officers. However, the review team noted that in some respects cultural change was still needed to ensure that continuous improvement took place.

Section 2: Support for school improvement

Summary

56. Almost all aspects of school improvement work are now satisfactory or better. There were several weaknesses at the time of the last inspection. Key functions, such as strategic planning, monitoring and challenging schools to improve, support for information and communication technology (ICT), and the performance management of services, were all unsatisfactory or worse. Now, only the strategy for providing management services remains weak.

57. In general, support to schools is targeted where it is needed, and intervention in under-performing schools is conducted very well. The authority has brought its work into line with the Code of Practice on LEA-School Relations, albeit late in the day. Expenditure on school improvement is broadly in line with the national average. In view of this, the authority's support for school improvement represents satisfactory value for money.

Monitoring, challenge, and intervention

58. At the time of the last inspection, this aspect of the LEA's work was unsatisfactory. There was a lack of definition of what was meant by monitoring and intervention and a lack of clarity over the respective roles of the LEA and schools in bringing about school improvement. Since then, progress has been made and the strategy is now satisfactory.

59. The authority has developed a clear programme in EDP2 for monitoring, challenge and intervention. It has also produced a 'concerns policy', which clarifies roles and reflects the DfES Code of Practice on LEA-School Relations. However, even though this was the subject of consultation, the extent to which schools understand it varies. Responses to the school survey, undertaken last summer, showed that many schools were then sceptical about the LEA's overall programme, but a smaller number of headteachers and governors interviewed during the inspection showed a good understanding and had stronger support for the authority's approach. In this respect, understanding has developed rapidly since the summer.

60. The advisory service applies criteria for intervention and support consistently and in proportion to schools' performance, particularly where primary schools are concerned. The termly visits by advisers to schools have a clear common focus, of which headteachers are informed beforehand. They include reviewing performance, scrutinising targets, monitoring the implementation of national strategies and observing teaching and learning. In addition, the LEA has introduced a programme of supported school self-evaluation. Through this, schools draw up their own programmes for review and negotiate inputs from the LEA. Sound use has been made of this to help develop the monitoring and evaluation skills of middle and senior managers and to provide subject specific support where necessary. At present, there is considerable direct input by the LEA into this programme but it is now rightly being refined and differentiated to take greater account of the skills of self-evaluation which already exist, or are developing, within schools.

61. The LEA has set high attainment targets for itself, particularly for Key Stage 2 English, and has challenged schools to raise their aspirations. Despite this, there is a considerable gap between the schools' aggregated targets and those of the LEA. There was a considerable feeling amongst the headteachers and governors interviewed that the LEA's own Key Stage 2 targets were unrealistic and there was some resentment at what was seen as too heavy-handed an approach by the authority in negotiating school targets. The schools involved in focus groups for this inspection welcomed the fact that the LEA was providing challenge, and in some cases headteachers accepted that this has been a factor in improving pupils' standards. Nevertheless, it is clear that the actual process had sometimes been unhelpful.

The focusing of LEA support on areas of greatest need

62. The previous report judged this aspect to be satisfactory but recommended that the LEA should use a systematic assessment of schools' needs as the basis for providing support. There has been sound progress in implementing the recommendation, and provision in this area is now highly satisfactory.

63. Since the last inspection, the LEA has introduced a policy for providing support to schools in relation to their needs, as identified through the evaluation of performance and data. Most schools are allocated one visit per term, as part of an agreed, published monitoring programme. The remainder receive extra time, funding and support according to degrees of concerns identified by the LEA or, in some cases, by the schools themselves subject to the LEA's moderation. The five levels of concern range from short term issues requiring specific, limited action to levels of concern which have led to a school being identified by Ofsted as having serious weaknesses or requiring special measures. The definitions for each level, the modes of identification and the actions required of the LEA and the schools, together with recommended timescales for their implementation, are defined precisely and differentiated clearly. This system links appropriately to the intensive support provided through the national strategies and local initiatives. All schools were consulted on this policy and most understand it.

64. As well as the "concerns policy", the LEA has also recently produced a directory which identifies precisely which are the core, centrally funded support services and which are traded services to be purchased by schools. This has been developed in close consultation with headteachers and, on their advice, the LEA has delegated more money to schools to enable them to buy additional help, either from the LEA agency or from other providers. This policy will be further underpinned by the proposed restructuring of the advisory service into a centrally funded school improvement service and self-supporting advisory agency. The LEA provides schools with information on services that can be bought from its own advisory service, through service level agreements. It also publishes a list of external providers of consultancy, advice and support. However, this is limited in its scope. For example, it does not include information on major providers nationally, nor disseminate information on the range of providers already being used by the authority's schools.

65. Although individual services monitor the time they allocate to schools, there is at present no reliable system for monitoring the total amount of time and support which any one school receives from the full range of LEA services. The authority recognises this weakness and has very recently introduced cross service meetings to rectify this.

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

66. At the last inspection, this aspect of the LEA's work was poor, mainly because target setting and the use and analysis of performance data were underdeveloped. There has been clear progress since then. This area is now generally satisfactory, although there are some aspects requiring further development.

67. The LEA now has a clear system for monitoring schools. Through this, and the associated school self-review programme, advisers are able to identify weakness at an increasingly early stage and to work with schools in devising programmes for improvement and in monitoring their implementation. In this process, they make appropriate use of performance data and assessments of teaching and learning but there is limited collation and co-ordination of information and support from other services.

68. The LEA has been successful in monitoring and challenging schools in special measures and serious weaknesses to improve. In the case of these schools, reports on progress have generally been clear and informative. In the case of schools not in these categories, however, advisers' notes of visits are of limited usefulness. At best the commentaries are confined to brief factual statements with little attempt at analysis; at worst, they contain no commentary at all. They are not copied as a matter of course to governors and therefore do not provide guidance to the latter in monitoring and challenging developments within their schools. A further weakness is that advisers' notes of visit cannot be retrieved electronically. Therefore, in working with a school, an adviser does not have a comprehensive picture of the advice and support being given by colleagues in the same or other services.

69. Since the last inspection, there has been a significant improvement in the range and quality of data that the LEA provides for its schools. This includes pupil-level performance data analysed against local as well as national benchmarks. The fact that all schools have agreed to share all information with each other makes this a powerful instrument in the process of school self review, as well as for external monitoring. However, there are still some weaknesses in this area. For example, although data is analysed according to gender and in relation to multiple deprivation indices, it is not analysed consistently in relation to the ethnicity of pupils. Whilst tabular comparisons of progress against targets are provided for each subject at secondary level, this information is confined to the core subjects in the case of primary schools.

70. In order to support the target setting process, the LEA has developed the Sunderland Template, which includes a range of predicted performance grades for each pupil, based on past performance. However, difficulties with inputting data onto the profile, and scepticism about its usefulness, mean that its use has declined since it was first piloted, so that now only about half the authority's schools use it. Although data provided by the authority is used to set targets in the core subjects, limited use of it is made in other areas of the curriculum, particularly at primary level. Also, because data on attainment is stored on a different system from data collected by other relevant services, its usefulness is limited in helping to underpin developments in the full range of a school's work.

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

71. At the time of the last inspection, this aspect of the authority's work was highly satisfactory. The LEA has built on the strengths identified then and provision is now very good. The three schools identified by Ofsted as requiring special measures in 1998 came out of that category briskly. Since then, only one primary and no secondary schools have required special measures. Now there are no schools in special measures or with serious weaknesses.

72. In tackling the issues faced by its under-performing schools, the LEA has worked very closely with the diocesan authorities and, where necessary, with neighbouring authorities. It has drafted effective and experienced headteachers into schools with weak leadership and appointed additional members to the governing bodies. It has organised training for governors and staff, tailored to their specific needs, and has provided extra money for the refurbishment and upgrading of school buildings.

73. The LEA monitors progress through regular completion of standard lesson observation forms, with actions agreed with the teacher and signed by both teacher and link inspector. Targets are set for under-performing teachers and improvement or removal has usually been swift or, alternatively, they have left their posts. The link inspector reviews evidence with the headteacher, carries out joint observations where necessary and provides feedback which leaves the school in no doubt where improvement is required. The LEA has made good use of its own evidence on these visits rather than relying on the observations of external inspectors and consultants. The authority has been careful to ensure that, during the period of intervention, the autonomy of the school is maintained and that headteachers and governors do not abnegate their leadership and management responsibilities. A further strength of the LEA's policy is that it has a clear exit strategy involving a gradual wind down of support, with extra financial help being withdrawn at a reasonable point rather than at the last possible moment.

74. Despite its success in removing schools from special measures or serious weakness, discussion with headteachers and governors indicated that, in some instances, the LEA had not identified problems early enough. The authority is addressing this issue through its concerns policy, which provides a clear mechanism for monitoring schools and providing timely additional support related to their needs.

Support for literacy

75. Support for literacy was previously satisfactory and the LEA's analysis indicates that this continues to be the case. No fieldwork was conducted in this area, but account was taken of HMI monitoring evidence. The inspection team supports the LEA's judgement. Nevertheless, the fact that the rate of improvement in pupils' attainment has slowed suggests that this service needs to continue to improve if it is to have the necessary impact on standards.

Support for numeracy

76. At the time of the last inspection support for numeracy was highly satisfactory. Mathematics results at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2 were close to the national average. The

LEA was judged to have made an effective start on moving towards the National Numeracy Strategy and there was evidence of improvement in the teaching of mathematics in primary schools. The LEA's support for numeracy continues to be highly satisfactory.

77. Between 1999 and 2002 results at Key Stages 1 and 2 have improved in line with or at a faster rate than the national average. This improvement has kept the LEA's results in line with national averages at Key Stage 2, although it slipped behind at Key Stage 1 in 2002.

78. The LEA did not meet its Key Stage 2 target for 2002 and it has a huge task to do so if it is to meet its 2004 target. Schools' targets do not add up to the LEA target, and, already, far fewer schools than nationally met their 2002 targets. The LEA is aware that schools do not all set targets that are both challenging and realistic, and not all have good strategies for meeting their targets. Accordingly, link advisers are introducing a new process this year.

79. The leadership and management of the numeracy strategy are sound and there is good joint working with other strategy managers. The action plan provides a clear breakdown of the progress of the strategy, appropriately bringing together inspection evidence, support from consultants and training evaluations. Criteria for supporting schools and the personnel involved are also clear. Analysis and targeted action, detailed in the EDP, take account of national requirements and local priorities. However, while underachieving groups are identified as a priority, the approach to analysing the reasons for underachievement and to setting staged targets that are monitored regularly, is not rigorous.

80. Primary and special schools rate the LEA's support as good. Analysis of schools' results indicated that the work of the consultants has had a positive impact on practice in a significant number of schools. Evaluations of training are very positive, and a comprehensive programme of network meetings and training for Key Stages 1-2 has been planned for this year. The consultants' ability to concentrate on targeted intervention has increased with the addition of 15 primary leading mathematics teachers, including two in special schools, as well as the partnering of Beacon schools with weaker schools. Links are being made with other work relating to numeracy, for example in early years provision, and in family numeracy.

Support for information and communication technology (ICT)

81. The previous inspection found support for ICT to be unsatisfactory because of the lack of an overall LEA strategy and the negative effects that this had on support for schools. There has been major progress since then and provision in this area is now very good.

82. The LEA has a very clear vision for ICT, which is translated into ambitious aims, supported by an effective strategy, which relates clearly to the EDP. The strategy has been developed in close consultation with schools and is clearly focused on raising pupils' attainment and the capability both of teachers and of pupils. There is a coherent relationship between it and relevant initiatives, such as the national strategies, the city learning centres, Excellence in Cities and the National Grid for Learning.

83. The authority has good systems for monitoring pupils' attainment and progress in ICT, drawing on attainment data, classroom observations and analyses of school inspection reports. It also uses this information to support schools in setting appropriate targets.

Attainment at the end of Key Stages 3 and 4 has increased significantly in recent years and, in most years, LEA averages are higher than those of statistical neighbours and are either in line with or better than national results. The LEA provides good support to schools in moderating teacher assessments of pupils' work. This has been enhanced by collaborative work with neighbouring authorities, through the Northern Grid for Learning.

84. All schools have broadband connection to the internet and all have achieved the national targets for ratios of computers to pupils. Several schools have already exceeded the 2004 targets. All schools have signed up to the New Opportunities Fund training programmes and 80 per cent of teachers have completed the training, a higher proportion than found nationally. The two recently opened city learning centres are a major source of support to schools. Through these, teachers and pupils have access to a wide range of facilities and training. This includes training in the cross-curricular application of ICT, an area which has been identified as in need of improvement by several inspection reports on the authority's schools. With the support of the LEA, schools have been helped to integrate work of the city learning centres into their own action plans and schemes. The city learning centres are also beginning to become an important vehicle for the dissemination of good practice.

85. The LEA conducts an annual survey of the extent and nature of support available to each school in terms of hardware, technical support, accommodation and funding. In this way it has a clear overview of provision and is able to target resources appropriately.

Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3

86. This aspect was not inspected previously. The LEA is now giving highly satisfactory support to schools in raising standards at Key Stage 3.

87. The Key Stage 3 strategy is closely related to the LEA's overall strategy for raising attainment. It is managed well by the head of the advisory service who is supported by a full complement of strand consultants. On the advice of the authority, each school has identified a member of the senior management team to oversee the strategy; a sensible arrangement that gives it prominence.

88. The training programme organised by the LEA has been well received by schools. Additional, intensive support from consultants is well targeted on under-performing schools and is regularly modified in the light of progress reports. There are coherent links with the national literacy and numeracy strategies and with initiatives such as the Education Action Zone and Excellence in Cities. Sound use is also being made of Beacon schools, advanced skills teachers and leading teachers to help disseminate good practice.

89. There is appropriate support for cross-phase work within the authority. This includes master classes for clusters of schools, observation of primary lessons by secondary teachers and co-teaching by staff from the two phases. Primary pupils have also been helped to make the transition to Key Stage 3 through 'taster' visits to secondary schools and by taking part in summer schools. However, for a variety of reasons, the latter have not always been sufficiently targeted on the pupils most in need of additional help.

90. The LEA reported that a few secondary schools responded slowly to the implementation of the national Key Stage 3 Strategy. However, there is good evidence of an

increase in focus and momentum. All heads of mathematics have been involved in training and all secondary schools are actively promoting numeracy across the curriculum by offering training and follow-up activities. Collectively, secondary schools are predicting a six per cent rise in Key Stage 3 mathematics results in 2003. The introduction of the foundation strand of the strategy is progressing well. Consultants have provided useful guidance on the cross-curricular application of numeracy and literacy and also instigated interesting collaborative programmes.

91. The LEA makes sound use of data to track pupils' progress. However the decision by some secondary schools not to use the optional Year 7 progress tests makes this more difficult in the core subjects. In the foundation subjects there are further difficulties because performance data at primary level is incomplete and secondary schools question the validity of the teacher assessment information which they receive. These factors detract from the development of effective cross-phase continuity.

92. It is too early to assess the impact of the Key Stage 3 strategy on results. In the core subjects, progress has been inconsistent across subjects and also between schools.

Support for minority ethnic groups including Travellers

93. This aspect was not previously inspected. Current provision is satisfactory.

94. Support for raising the attainment of pupils from minority ethnic groups and promoting racial equality is a clearly defined priority within the EDP. The authority has relevant policies on equal opportunities, bilingualism and racial harassment and, at the time of the inspection, was consulting schools on its draft policy for race equality and the education of minority ethnic and Traveller children.

95. To support the implementation of these policies, the LEA has arranged a number of relevant authority-wide courses and also provided specific training and support for staff in schools with the highest concentration of minority ethnic and Traveller pupils. This has been complemented by the allocation of funding to support the appointment of mother tongue speakers to help promote attainment in those schools. Further support is provided for the parents of pre-school children and a pilot programme of mother tongue assessment has recently been introduced into relevant nursery departments.

96. The LEA monitors the achievement, attendance and special needs of minority ethnic and Traveller pupils and sets targets for them. However, the considerable mismatch in some instances between targets and attainment, particularly in the case of pupils of Bangladeshi heritage, indicates that the support work is not consistently well focused.

97. The allocation of funding is transparent. Most of the authority's minority ethnic pupils are concentrated in five schools. However, there are also pupils across the authority who are the only ones in their respective schools with English as an additional language. In order to respond flexibly to these circumstances, the LEA has sensibly retained the Minority ethnic Achievement Grant centrally. This is used to fund a small specialist team including teachers, bilingual assistants and a nursery nurse. In addition, the authority has wisely amended the school funding formula in order to provide schools with additional funding proportional to the number of pupils with English as an additional language.

98. Most of the authority's Traveller pupils attend one primary and one secondary school. The Traveller Achievement Grant is used well to fund support within the schools and also to prepare distance-learning packs for use away from school. These teachers also encourage pupils to attend for external examinations and, where feasible, provide outreach support to families when they are travelling.

Support for gifted and talented pupils

99. The LEA's support for gifted and talented pupils was not inspected in the previous inspection. Its provision is now highly satisfactory.

100. The authority has traditionally supported gifted and talented pupils in a range of ways, including the use of mathematics master-classes and music events, and providing a small amount of training for teachers. This support has become more systematic since the allocation of about ten per cent of an adviser's time to co-ordinate the work. The LEA has recently issued useful guidance to schools, wisely featuring a range of subject-specific advice, albeit not covering art or drama. A group of primary schools has now begun to work with the adviser to improve their own provision, and the activities of this group have considerable potential, but many other schools have yet to participate. The authority is supporting schools in entering pupils for the new world-class tests, and is sensibly using advanced skills teachers to support this work. It is also developing training for schools in higher order thinking skills in several subjects.

101. The EDP contains a number of relevant action plans for further improvement, and recent activity has been monitored usefully. The LEA has given strong support to the Excellence in Cities (EiC) initiative, as detailed elsewhere in this report. This has led to a significant raising of commitment in the schools, and gifted pupils now have access to many valuable activities, including ICT-based projects undertaken at the city learning centres. Taking their lead from the LEA's approach, schools have tended to tailor the emphasis of this strand of EiC to the specific needs of their school. There are some indications that the EiC initiatives are beginning to have a positive impact on pupils' achievement.

102. The LEA gives good support to talented young sports people. This work, closely related to the aims of the local public service agreement, derives its strength from the community and cultural services department, working in liaison with the education department. Pupils with particular talent are given expert coaching at a comprehensive school with specialist sports college status, and sensible plans are in hand to extend this support so that other pupils with potential might gain similar support from other specialist sports schools. Good use is made of regional support for pupils with sporting talents.

103. The authority, through the expertise of its adviser, and the strength of its collaboration with the EiC partnership, has made progress. However, the very limited time made available to the adviser restricts the reach of the work. Furthermore, the systems for monitoring and challenge to schools by the school improvement service do not give sufficient regular attention to the progress made by gifted and talented pupils

Recommendations**In order to improve support for gifted and talented pupils:**

- increase the time allocated to the adviser for supporting schools and pupils;
- establish procedures that ensure that the school improvement service evaluates all schools' provision for gifted and talented pupils as part of its normal support to schools.

Support for school management

104. In the previous inspection, support for management was satisfactory. The LEA's self-assessment indicates that it continues to be the case. As a result, this aspect was not the subject of a full inspection. Instead, the inspection team focused on the extent to which the LEA has implemented the recommendation in the last report that the LEA should strengthen its support for schools' middle managers. The inspection team's conclusion is that this is now satisfactory, although there are still some weaknesses.

105. The LEA supports schools' middle managers in a number of ways. It organises a range of relevant courses on general management issues, as well as subject specific courses, and arranges regular meetings for subject leaders in secondary schools. The programmes supporting the national strategies provide further relevant training and support and, as part of its intervention in under-performing schools, the LEA has, where appropriate, arranged specific training for middle managers. Another useful element in its strategy is the programme of supported school self review, where middle managers are helped to develop their skills of monitoring and evaluation and to refine their programmes and management systems in the light of this.

106. Although these are well-based strategies, they have not been applied consistently. Support for primary middle managers has mainly been confined to core subjects, even though inspection reports show weaknesses in most of the foundation subjects at this level.

Support to governors

107. In the previous inspection, this aspect was found to be highly satisfactory. The LEA's assessment is that this continues to be the case. No fieldwork was undertaken. On the basis of documentary evidence and discussion with governors, the inspection team supports the LEA's judgement.

The effectiveness of services to support school management

108. In the previous inspection no overall judgement was made on the effectiveness of the arrangements for management services. However, the report recommended that more effective quality assurance arrangements should be established and that service level agreements (SLA) with schools should be revised. There has been extensive development and consultation since then, but support for schools to procure management services is unsatisfactory.

109. The LEA's approach does not sufficiently promote and support school autonomy. Information circulated to schools about LEA services is provided too late to allow headteachers and governors time to consider options, and make decisions as they are setting school budgets before the start of the financial year. Some important services are omitted from the annual brochure. There is no provision of information about alternative providers for delegated functions. The brochure gives little indication of how or when to initiate or confirm purchase of a service, and gives information about prices in only a minority of cases. Many of the services only offer a single level of service provision.

110. The pricing mechanism for some services is unsatisfactory because it is not based on the cost of the service to be provided. Moreover, because only one level is often available, those schools that make extensive use of a service might receive very good value for money while others are paying for more than they use. There are, however, some examples of good practice. The cleaning, property and grounds maintenance service contracts are reviewed annually and are varied to suit the changing needs of schools. These are then provided at a price that is based on the cost of delivering the service agreed.

111. Quality assurance and monitoring arrangements are satisfactory, and in some cases, for example cleaning and catering, demonstrate good practice. All services have effective mechanisms to consult schools about service quality and development, but this does not always lead to value for money because costs are not always examined fully. In the case of cleaning, catering and grounds maintenance good quality client support is available from different sources in the LEA for those schools that want to make alternative arrangements. The distinction between the client support that is available from the education directorate and contract services is not sufficiently clear.

112. The LEA recognised the need to improve arrangements after the previous inspection but progress has been too slow. Discussions have been taking place with schools in various working groups during the intervening four years. The LEA is now taking steps to implement changes. This is welcome, but schools will still not be provided with good, differentiated service specifications in time for them to make decisions as part of their budget planning process for 2003/04.

Recommendations

In order to promote effective school self management and to support the procurement of good value services:

- prepare a comprehensive brochure of central provision and traded services and distribute it to schools in time for them to make considered purchasing decisions at least three months before any contract decision is required;
- offer services in a flexible way so that schools can choose to purchase the level of service that best meets their needs; and
- ensure that schools are informed how to gain information about alternative service providers.

113. **Financial services** were highly satisfactory in the previous inspection. The LEA's analysis indicates that this is still the case. No fieldwork was conducted in this area but documentary evidence supports the LEA's assessment.

114. **Human resources services** were judged to be highly satisfactory in the previous inspection but are now good. Clearly written model policies are offered for schools that include grievance, discipline, capability for teachers and other staff, and recruitment and attendance management. Casework support is good. Contracts are issued in a timely way and links with payroll services are effective. Absence statistics are provided to schools twice yearly together with advice on how to use them. Industrial tribunal cases are rare and the LEA has been successful in all cases that reached tribunal in recent years. There are generally good relationships with trades unions. The service is in the top quartile in the school survey and schools express positive comments about the service.

115. The personnel team also supports other services in the education directorate. It took the lead role in securing investors in people (IIP) re-accreditation and manages the conduct of the appraisal process.

116. Support for **administrative ICT** was judged satisfactory in the previous inspection. The LEA's analysis indicates that this is still the case. No fieldwork was conducted in this area but documentary evidence supports the LEA's assessment.

117. In the previous inspection **property services** were found to be unsatisfactory. They are now highly satisfactory. The strengths are in quality assurance, and in advice on health and safety. The property service SLA provides a property management and advice service including preventative maintenance, regular servicing and safety checks on plant and machinery. The property service was one of the first in the industry to achieve ISO 9001 and this underpins its quality assurance systems. The service commissions and manages building works using approved external contractors or the council's works department. Schools rated the service as satisfactory in the survey for this inspection, and property services' own customer feedback shows 95 per cent of schemes were completed on time and to budget.

118. **Cleaning and caretaking services**, which were not reviewed in the previous inspection, are highly satisfactory. The contract cleaning service offers schools a flexible, competitive contract. Quality assurance arrangements are good and the service's own customer feedback is very positive. In the survey for this inspection, schools rate the service as satisfactory.

119. **Grounds maintenance** services are also highly satisfactory with flexible, annually negotiated contracts and good quality assurance arrangements.

120. The contract services directorate has started discussions with a view to providing comprehensive facilities management service to cover cleaning, grounds, catering, property and security services. This is a welcome development providing that it does not restrict schools' options.

121. **Catering services** are good. Most schools are members of a consortium, which has a group contract with the contract services directorate, and a few schools have their own separate contract. Others make their own arrangements with another provider. Quality

assurance processes are good and the service has been able to arrange for the school meals menu to be published each week in the local newspaper so that parents can see what is on offer.

122. The catering service contributes well to social inclusion. The take-up of free school meals is currently low compared with other LEAs, but the council's LPSA agreement includes a commitment to improving this. Dining facilities in several schools have been improved using regeneration funds. In one of these the take up of meals has increased, and the proportion of pupils leaving the campus at lunchtime has reduced, to the reported benefit of local residents, and there has been a significant improvement in attainment at the school. In other examples, schools provide breakfast to enable pupils to concentrate throughout morning lessons. Schools are very positive about the work of the catering service.

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

123. This is a new area, not previously inspected. Current provision is satisfactory.

124. Sunderland does not experience significant problems in the recruitment and retention of teachers. However, in a recent survey of teaching skills, needs and provision in the north east of England, 78 per cent of Sunderland headteachers reported that there were too few applicants for posts and 32 per cent were dissatisfied with the quality of the applications received. For some time, the LEA had a working party, which was meant to focus on recruitment and retention issues. However, its meetings were sporadic and its membership lacked continuity. The LEA was slow to tackle this issue. Very recently, however, it has established a new working party, chaired by the head of personnel, which will meet termly to monitor the supply and quality of teachers, to analyse data on patterns of vacancies and to develop strategies to address emerging issues. Appropriately, the working party includes representatives from teacher training institutions, head teachers, professional associations and governing bodies, as well as from the LEA.

125. The proportion of Sunderland teachers who are newly qualified teachers is well above the national average. The LEA has made a strong contribution to the recruitment of such teachers by providing a centrally funded pool of newly qualified teachers. The induction programme for these teachers is well organised. It focuses on generic as well as specific issues and includes an appropriate balance of theory and practice. The LEA works closely with schools in monitoring the progress of new teachers and in providing additional support where required.

126. The proportion of newly qualified teachers who stay in the LEA for a second year is well above the national average. To help ensure that this is a continuing trend, the LEA has sensibly extended the induction programme into a second year. This is linked to the coherent continuing professional development programme, which the LEA provides for teachers at all stages of their career.

127. Sunderland schools rely heavily on supply teachers. Hitherto the LEA has supported them usefully by maintaining a central list of supply teachers but this is now being reviewed in the light of new delegation arrangements.

128. The LEA provides a well-organised mentoring programme for headteachers new to headship or to the authority and supports their involvement in national training programmes. It also provides appropriate support for newly appointed deputy headteachers and assistant head teachers.

The effectiveness of services to support school improvement

129. The last inspection found that the services contributing to school improvement were satisfactory in terms of their effectiveness, the way that they were led, the expertise of the staff involved and the way that staff were deployed. No specific fieldwork was conducted in relation to these matters. However, on the basis of documentation and discussions with relevant staff, the inspection team agrees with the LEA's view that these functions continue to be satisfactory.

130. At the last inspection, strategic planning and performance management of school improvement services were unsatisfactory. There have been clear, albeit recent, improvements in both these areas and they are now satisfactory.

131. The service plan for school improvement is clearly linked to the EDP and to the overall priorities of the LEA. Interviews held during the inspection show that this link is understood both by staff and by headteachers. The targets set are specific, measurable and sharply focused on raising standards. Responsibilities for implementation, success criteria and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation are clearly identified. The interrelationship between the various services contributing to school improvement is not always sufficiently clear. The LEA is aware of this and, over the last year, has been developing improved structures for mapping out these interrelationships and maintaining a consistent focus across services. The seminars recently introduced by the director of education, where all services work together on reviewing school performance, promise to make an important contribution to achieving this aim.

132. The new director of education is beginning to improve the performance management of school improvement services. Individual performance agreements are now being related more closely to objectives for the whole directorate and systems are being introduced to ensure greater consistency of approach across all the relevant services. Performance management of these services is based on an appraisal process where individual performance is reviewed, objectives are set and progress is monitored through twice-yearly meetings with line managers. Individual objectives are driven by corporate and service priorities and by individual developmental needs. Appraisal is linked to appropriate induction and continuing professional development programmes.

Section 3: Special educational needs

Summary

133. Since the last inspection the effectiveness of the LEA's support for special educational needs (SEN) has deteriorated in a number of important areas while improving in others. The main barrier to overall improvement has been the lack of a commonly agreed and appropriately resourced strategy for SEN and inclusion, which would guide thinking and planning. In addition, the monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of work has not been systematic or thorough. While satisfactory progress has been made in some areas operational decisions have often been made in isolation, so preventing consistency and coherence of action.

Strategy

134. The 1998 inspection judged the LEA's strategy for SEN to be satisfactory. While the LEA's initial self-evaluation indicated that this continued to be the case, the response from the school survey indicated a different point of view. As a result the inspection focused on the issues raised by schools in relation to SEN strategy. The strategy for SEN is now unsatisfactory.

135. Primary and secondary schools' views of the quality of the LEA's SEN strategy placed the authority in the bottom 25 per cent of local authorities surveyed, although the special school response was more positive, indicating their view that the strategy was satisfactory. However, it was in the written comments from schools that it became clear where their concerns lay. Nursery, primary, secondary and special schools all indicated a serious lack of clear strategic thinking and planning by the LEA. They suggested a lack of transparency, consistency, coherence, and co-ordination, and a failure by the authority to target its actions in response to schools' and pupils' needs. The inspection has found considerable evidence to support all these criticisms.

136. In 1999 the Secretary of State refused the LEA's proposal to restructure SEN provision. This was followed by a hiatus in overall strategic leadership, which led to confusion about the LEA's direction and to fragmentation of development and delivery of provision. There are a number of instances where decisions seem to have been made to meet short term needs and where little account was taken of the practicalities having to be managed daily by parents and schools. New special schools were built without an overall plan for SEN. Grant funding was used to increase services at the centre with limited consultation with schools. Rigid adherence was made to funding mechanisms and to procedures that got in the way of meeting children's needs accurately or as speedily as possible. While the decisions have often been understandable and, sometimes, defensible in terms of the specific short term need being targeted, they have not been made within a wider long-term strategy to improve provision and raise attainment for all pupils.

137. Despite these weaknesses, there is strong evidence of a changing mood in schools as well as in the directorate, primarily as a result of a recent willingness and determination on the part of the LEA to open up all areas of its SEN and inclusion strategy, resourcing and

planning to scrutiny. The crucial consultation on the new SEN inclusion strategy and five year action plan, as well as on other related strategies and plans, and the pending restructuring of central services, has generated an optimism about what is possible not only within education but in a wider arena. Special schools are particularly positive about the change in pace, and are keen to be part of a strategy that utilises their specialist skills and expertise for the general good.

138. The new move towards a strategy demonstrates that the LEA recognises the importance of building on good practice, including that in schools, which is considerable. Ofsted school inspections, for example, report that the progress made by pupils with SEN is well above the national average at all key stages. The LEA is committed to the collection of suitable data to ensure accurate and timely analysis of pupils' needs, and to the provision of appropriate training for staff. Discussions are well advanced with key partners, such as social services and the health service, and have been extended to include, for example, parents and those working in early years and in broader 14 –19 provision.

139. However, there is still a long way to go to ensure that intentions are translated into practice. There are still a number of separate developments either in consultation or in existence, rather than one coherent strategy. There is a lack of clarity about the amount and nature of the training that will be needed to support mainstream schools manage the change successfully. The current action plan does not have a sharp focus on measurable outcomes or on the mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating progress.

Recommendation

In order to improve the strategy for SEN:

- bring together all the separate plans that have a bearing on SEN inclusion into one cohesive and agreed strategic plan.

Statutory obligations

140. The effectiveness of the LEA in taking steps to meet its statutory obligations was judged as unsatisfactory in the last inspection. A key issue highlighted was the stalling of the formal process for assessing pupils' needs because of the limited time allocated to assessment by the educational psychology service (EPS). This led to a recommendation requiring the LEA to ensure that schools received the educational psychological support they needed. There has been partial progress towards meeting this recommendation. More generally, there is evidence of a more rigorous, analytical approach to the authority's work in this area and a willingness to listen to the concerns expressed by a range of partners, including schools and parents. The LEA now meets its obligations satisfactorily, although some aspects of weaknesses still remain.

141. The LEA fulfils its duties as expressed in the revised national Code of Practice. Detailed arrangements for identifying and assessing pupils with SEN have been reviewed and are in operation. These are outlined in a clear guidance document that has been issued as part of a revised, and useful, SEN Handbook for schools. Statements are reviewed annually,

although some are still insufficiently detailed, for example relating to disapplication from the national curriculum or the need for specific equipment.

142. The speed at which statutory assessments are made has improved considerably and is now above average in comparison to similar authorities and nationally. However, there is still too much delay in the way in which other agencies, in particular the health authority, respond to requests for information. Both the SEN service and the health authority recognise the issues that need to be addressed and are working together to find solutions to the difficulties. Formal criteria for statutory assessment have been revised, in consultation with schools, and relevant training has been provided. Consultation is being undertaken on a draft Accessibility Strategy, intended to meet the new requirements of the SEN and Disability Act 2001.

143. The LEA recognises that it still insufficiently responsive to parents and does not always communicate effectively with them. Significant efforts are being made to improve the information provided to parents and to resolve their concerns at an early stage. A new handbook for parents has recently been completed, drawn up in consultation with social services and the health service in an effort to secure a consistent approach to parents, but this is rather dense and may need revision after evaluation by parents.

144. A parent partnership and a regional conciliation service are readily available to support parents at any stage in the SEN process. The services are publicised widely to parents, to schools and to an impressive range of relevant agencies. The parent partnership officer, who is employed and managed by the authority, is extremely active in working with individuals and groups of parents. The work undertaken is effective and valued highly. However, there is no systematic, independent monitoring process in place by which the LEA can evaluate the impact of the service.

SEN functions to support school improvement

145. The effectiveness of the LEA in exercising its SEN functions to support school improvement was satisfactory in the first inspection and confirmed as satisfactory by the LEA when it completed its self-evaluation. The focus for this inspection, as with the SEN strategy above, was the response to the relevant school survey questions, which suggested that schools had a different view of the effectiveness of SEN services. The inspection evidence supports a number of the schools' concerns and confirms that this function is unsatisfactory.

146. In the school survey, primary and secondary schools' views of the LEA's effectiveness in developing schools' capacity to meet the needs of pupils with SEN placed the LEA in the bottom 25 per cent of authorities surveyed. Special schools, however, felt the support to be satisfactory. At individual service level the effectiveness of learning support and educational psychology support were both also rated in the bottom 25 per cent of authorities surveyed although there were slight, but not significant, differences in the views of primary, special and secondary schools. Support for behaviour, however, while not satisfactory overall showed a significant difference of view, with primary schools rating it as satisfactory. This is examined in greater detail later in this report.

147. The overriding view of schools, both in the survey and subsequently during the inspection, was one of confusion as to the totality of what was available, why, how, when and whether they had to pay anything for it. Some schools were very strongly critical. Nursery schools felt particularly let down as they neither have a devolved budget for SEN, nor enough access to central services to manage the increase they are experiencing in SEN pupils who do not have statements. Schools praised the commitment and expertise found in many individuals in the central services. However, there has been a lack of communication between and sometimes within services. There is some duplication between central provision and that which schools can provide for themselves, or to which they can gain access through separate funding. Unnecessarily bureaucratic procedures have created delays for pupils and parents and excessive work for schools. There has been a lack of consultation about what was being provided when a pupil was supported by more than one service.

148. The role of the educational psychology service is unclear, and their work is not sufficiently well managed. Schools are unable to make good use of the allocation of educational psychologist (EP) time in school. Although the LEA employs significantly more EPs than similar authorities or the national average, their allocated time in each school is almost always completely eaten up by the statutory assessment process, even though this does not lead to a high number of statements. Schools clearly value the skills and expertise of EPs and want to use them more creatively, for early advice. Where schools have bought in extra EP time through service level agreements they have found it extremely effective in supporting early intervention and in, for example, preventing exclusions.

149. While the weaknesses listed above are clearly significant there is also evidence of a number of strengths upon which the impending restructuring of the service is expected to build. For example, there is some good work within the support services that has a beneficial effect on individual pupils and schools, including support given to senior managers in schools to write SEN policies and review procedures and practices. There has also been active support from the LEA to some schools that wished to develop learning support units, although this has not been consistent, nor has it been monitored well. On the whole, special educational needs co-ordinators are supported well, and they receive effective and high quality training provision. The authority encourages learning support assistants as well as for teaching staff to undertake relevant professional development and the take-up is impressive, enabling schools to become more self-sufficient in supporting pupils with SEN and preventing some pupils having to be educated away from home. There is also an increasing awareness in the SEN services of the need to collect and use data in order to improve provision. There are well advanced plans for changing the funding and monitoring of the effectiveness of SEN services.

*Recommendations***In order improve support for school improvement:**

- reorganise the work of the educational psychology service in order to better meet the needs of schools and pupils and to ensure that the level of resource invested in it is appropriate; and
- identify all current SEN provision and, in collaboration with schools, determine what SEN services should be provided in the future and how they will be funded;

Value for money

150. This aspect of the LEA's work was not covered in the previous inspection. The authority's own evaluation is that it is satisfactory. However, while this inspection showed that steps are now being taken to move forward in providing value for money, the situation is currently unsatisfactory because the LEA is unable to demonstrate that it targets spending well or monitors its effect on pupils' achievement.

151. Sunderland allocates a lower proportion of its local schools budget (11.9 per cent) to pupils with SEN than the average of other authorities (statistical neighbours 15.4 per cent, metropolitan authorities 15.4 per cent and all English LEAs 15.7 per cent). Within this overall total, allocations to centrally retained funding for pupil support and delegated funding for pupils without statements, are below averages. The emphasis of this rather low budget is therefore on support for statemented pupils. Funding to provide support for pupils with statements is delegated to schools by a formula which varies according to the needs of the particular child. However, there is a lack of transparency in the budget for promoting collaboration and sharing good practice. In reality, much of this money is used to meet additional needs of pupils that not met through the allocated delegated funding.

152. The SEN resource allocation process is ineffective. It has been reviewed, but change has not been agreed. Schools tend to feel that, because the amount delegated to them for non-statemented SEN is relatively low, a statement is needed if a pupil is to be given significant support. Officers and special educational needs co-ordinators are then involved in an expensive and frustrating paper chase for a statement that in many cases is inappropriate to that pupil's needs. This is a disincentive to early intervention, which might well have been more beneficial to the pupil. It absorbs the time of specialists, both inside and outside of the education directorate, which could be more sensibly used to promote the LEA's inclusion policy.

153. Ofsted school inspections indicate that the majority of schools make good provision for children with SEN, but the LEA does not monitor satisfactorily how well each school uses the funds delegated to them for SEN. Furthermore, the monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of central services is weak, and the authority cannot judge how these services contribute to the raising of standards.

154. Nevertheless, there are some examples of work underway to analyse practice and costs. A considerable amount of effective work has been done to ensure that the allocation of

statements is equitable and meets the requirements of the revised Code of Practice. The number of pupils with statements who are placed in special schools outside the city is now below that in other authorities. Even so, the LEA continues to review how it can meet the needs of more pupils locally, in the interests of the pupils and their parents, as well as for good resource management. Progress is being made on reviewing statements, not only to ensure that a pupil's provision is being updated to meet current needs but also to enable the LEA to cease the statement if it is appropriate. The SEN home-to-school transport budget is being reviewed as a response to a recent rise in costs and in view of the implications of the further inclusion in mainstream schools of pupils with SEN.

Recommendations

In order to make better use of funding for SEN:

- adjust the rationale for funding SEN so that a higher proportion of the money available is brought to pupils at an earlier stage of the Code of Practice;
- introduce effective monitoring of the way in which the funds delegated to schools for SEN are used to meet pupils' needs; and
- implement systems for evaluating the effects of the work of central SEN services, including the value for money they provide;

Section 4: Promoting social inclusion

The strategy to promote social inclusion

155. The LEA was satisfactory in its promotion of social inclusion in the last inspection. Since that time, increased demands have been made at a national level and the authority has kept pace with development and remains satisfactory in most respects.

156. There has been considerable progress in a number of areas. The community strategy for Sunderland has a major influence in ensuring that social inclusion is seen as a fundamental part of the council's regeneration work. It is reflected well in recent key strategic documents of the education directorate, as well as in the thinking and planning of the LEA's partners. There is an understanding of the council's vision at all levels within the directorate, and recognition of the prioritisation of the issues to be tackled. The Area Regeneration Frameworks support the identification of the requirements of different communities. They also contribute to the urgent overarching issues, such as combating disadvantage through early years activities, and the addressing of racism.

157. The education directorate has made progress on articulating the implications for schools and partners of the council's vision. Schools express enthusiasm about the direction in which the LEA is heading and they demonstrate an understanding of the part they need to play in improving the life chances of all pupils, particularly for the most vulnerable groups. The EDP and other plans set targets for increasing levels of attainment for all groups, for improving attendance and for encouraging pupils to stay in education beyond the statutory years.

158. However, the pace has been slow. The LEA has taken too long to put in place a comprehensive and secure process for collecting and using essential data. Monitoring and evaluation has often been an afterthought and not an integral part of every service's thinking and daily working. There has been a plethora of reviews and reports, both internally and involving external agencies, that has made key recommendations but these have often not been linked together or followed through. A number of key strategies and plans, such as those relating to SEN and inclusion, and to social inclusion, are only now being consulted on.

159. Over the last six months there has been a great deal of action. Senior managers are aware of the urgent need to bring together all the operational plans in education into a single, coherent social inclusion strategy. Some services are leading the way and provide good practice on which to build. These include work in identifying and intervening in schools that are not raising levels of attainment sufficiently by themselves. Similarly, valuable work is being done to implement systematic procedures and processes to keep children safe, allied to high quality multi-agency training for all those who need it. Other examples of good practice include the development of early years education in disadvantaged areas, and the good links that exist between special and mainstream schools at Key Stage 4 for potentially vulnerable young people. In addition, the LEA has a good record in encouraging and funding schools to develop extended provision that will benefit local communities. There is out of schools hours learning provision at a very high proportion of the city's schools and there has been active

promotion of school meals as a means to improve attainment and encourage children to stay in school during the lunch period.

160. However, there are other areas requiring action, effective performance management and appropriate support if the promotion of social inclusion is to continue to move forward fast. These include all aspects of SEN but, in particular, strategy, funding and the monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of all SEN services and provision in relation to raising standards and attainment. Weaknesses also need to be remedied in the amount and quality of provision for excluded pupils and the facilitation of their re-integration into mainstream schools. Work to combat racism has too low a profile. Above all, there is an increasingly urgent need to establish one coherent strategic plan that brings together the current plethora of individual service plans and strategies.

The supply of school places

161. At the time of the previous inspection the provision of school places was satisfactory. Pupil numbers were declining and the LEA was recommended to reduce the levels of surplus places in nurseries and in primary schools. There has been some progress in reducing surplus places and this function remains satisfactory.

162. The LEA has taken action to reduce the number of surplus primary school places. A first phase review was undertaken in 2000/01, which identified 2500 places to be removed. Implementation of this review is nearly complete. However, this first phase was not ambitious enough. The continuing decline in the number of primary school aged children means that the number of surplus places will continue to grow from 18 per cent in September 2003 to 21 per cent in September 2006. In order to reduce the surplus to an acceptable ten per cent, a further 3572 places will need to be removed. Consultation has therefore recently begun on a second phase review, which includes options to remove a further 2703 places in three of the six planning areas. Further reviews will follow. The LEA does not yet have definite plans for the reductions necessary if the ten per cent target is to be achieved.

163. There is a strong commitment by elected members and by the corporate centre to tackling the issue of surplus places in primary schools. The existence of surplus capacity is seen as an opportunity to develop wider community provision by making positive use of the resources that become available. The current round of proposals includes provision for an extended school, providing community facilities, in each area of the city where significant place reductions are planned. In the previous round a community sports facility was built alongside a refurbished primary school.

164. There is currently a close match between the number of secondary pupils and the number of available places. However this overall figure masks surplus places in some schools and overcrowding in others. In future years the secondary school population will fall and the LEA has plans to take action to reduce surplus places. A review is currently underway in one affected area.

165. The LEA intends to use the removal of surplus places as an opportunity to raise standards. However, this does not feature clearly enough in the criteria used by the LEA to determine future action. Neither the committee reports about place provision nor the school

organisation plan (SOP), draw attention to the strong correlation between the schools with high proportions of surplus places and those with low levels of attainment.

166. The LEA uses a suitable method to forecast pupil numbers and these are recorded accurately at borough and area level. They are not so accurate at the level of individual schools. The SOP is an adequate description of the LEA's intentions for the provision of school places for pupils of statutory school age, but it is insufficiently explicit about links with plans for early years places and for the implications of post-16 provision. There are also significant inaccuracies in the presentation of data. This year the consultation on the SOP should be complete within the proper timescales, but last year it was agreed late because of staff changes in the LEA and the failure to publish the necessary statutory notices. The school organisation committee is well established and functions effectively. Consultation with schools, dioceses and other stakeholders is good.

Recommendations

In order to improve the planning of school places:

- ensure that plans for the removal of more primary surplus places are implemented rapidly; and
- revise the school organisation plan to include information on nursery provision and post-16 provision, and the implications for school places;

Admissions

167. The previous inspection found the management of admissions to be satisfactory. It continues to be satisfactory.

168. Admissions appeals remain relatively few, less than 4 per cent of admissions to community secondary schools, and they are administered well. All appeals in relation to applications submitted by the deadline are completed by the end of May, in time to allow children to participate in induction activities during the second half of the summer term.

169. Admissions literature provides insufficient information for parents. The LEA produces booklets annually for the parents of children who will be starting primary school and for those whose children will be transferring to secondary school. These are distributed together with a directory of all the schools maintained by the LEA. The introductory booklets explain the formal and legal responsibilities of schools, parents and the LEA. However, in spite of good links between the LEA and both dioceses, details of the admissions criteria and application procedures for denominational schools are omitted. While there is some basic information about appeals to community schools there is no clear indication of the extent to which schools have been oversubscribed in recent years.

*Recommendation***In order to improve the arrangements for admissions to schools:**

- revise the booklets for parents to include details about admissions to voluntary aided schools and details of previous over-subscription of schools;

170. The LEA has undertaken a major review of admissions criteria for secondary schools and has changed from a catchment area system to one where, in the majority of cases, admissions criteria give priority to feeder schools. This has the potential for promoting continuity in children's education. There was extensive consultation about which primary schools should be clustered with which secondary schools. It was, though, necessary to retain the catchment area system temporarily in one part of the city as a consequence of the opening of a new voluntary aided secondary school. As a result of a delay by the LEA in publishing proposed reductions to admission numbers for certain other schools, those schools have admitted more pupils than envisaged in the LEA's strategy, thus frustrating one of the original objects of establishing the new school.

Asset management

171. Asset management planning was not covered in the previous inspection. It is now good.

172. The capital programme has grown from £7.3 million in 1997/98 to £29 million in 2002/03. The LEA has a good record in attracting external funding and draws on a wide variety of sources to fund the capital programme. The large and growing number of surplus places, particularly in primary schools, heavily influences the LEA's capital strategy. Major capital schemes are linked to the removal of surplus places through building new schools to replace existing schools in poor condition, merging schools, or refurbishing accommodation to meet different needs. Two new schools have been built since 2000 and two merged. In five other schools rolls have been reduced and accommodation re-furbished to provide improved teaching and community facilities. The LEA is coming to the end of a major programme of building new and refurbishing existing special schools following a major review of provision.

173. The DfES granted the LEA autonomy over capital allocations from April 2001 following an assessment of its strategy. Furthermore, in November 2002 it was judged by the DfES to be making satisfactory progress with its asset management plan (AMP). There are good links between the corporate AMP and the schools' AMPs. The benefit of this corporate approach is that schools are considered as potential venues for community and regeneration schemes in order to make best use of the buildings and to secure maximum value from the various funding sources.

174. Allocation of funding to improve conditions is fair and transparent. The programme for improving conditions has been successful. In December 2000 the LEA had the third highest condition backlog of any LEA in England at £560 per pupil; it was successfully reduced to £133 per pupil by December 2002.

175. The capital programme is managed well, although a summary of the whole programme is not provided to schools. There are regular meetings between education officers and property professionals to monitor progress and when projects do fall behind schedule remedial action is taken. Progress is reported regularly to senior management and the cabinet. Monitoring of schools' use of delegated capital is effective and supportive. The LEA has been innovative and willing to try new procurement methods: four schools have been built using a partnership approach, and initial evaluation shows this to have been successful. A new secondary school built using the Private Finance Initiative opened in September, incorporating a library, electronic village hall, sports facilities, library, nursery centre and the LEA professional development centre.

Provision of education for pupils who have no school place

176. The LEA's self-evaluation of current provision for pupils who have no school place as satisfactory supports the judgement made in the last inspection. However, the response of schools to the survey showed that they had concerns about provision for excluded pupils and, in particular about procedures for the re-admission of these pupils. This latter concern also related to a recommendation in the previous report which required the authority to establish clear procedures, clearly understood by the schools, for the re-integration of excluded pupils into mainstream schools. The survey demonstrated that both primary and secondary schools judged re-integration to be unsatisfactory and rated the LEA in the bottom 25 per cent of authorities surveyed. This aspect of the LEA's work was, therefore, included in the inspection. The inspection finds that this area of work is poor.

177. Most crucially, the authority is not meeting its legal responsibility to ensure that all pupils excluded from school for more than 15 days receive suitable full-time education. While full time provision is provided for those who are permanently excluded, primarily through the pupil referral unit (PRU), there is no similar security of provision for pupils who are on a fixed-term exclusion. At the time of the inspection, and on investigation, the authority was found not to be meeting its duty for at least five pupils. There was no evidence to demonstrate that the authority had been working collaboratively with the schools to ensure that the statutory requirement was met in full.

178. An LEA protocol to cover the statutory requirement is only in draft, although the duty has been in place since September 2002. This protocol, not unreasonably, expects schools to work with the LEA in resolving how to maintain full time provision for excluded pupils, particularly in relation to the 15-day rule. However, this has not been adequately discussed or formally agreed with all schools. Neither have the suggested options for temporary alternative education, such as temporary attendance at another school or with an alternative provider, been secured.

Recommendation

In order to meet its statutory responsibility to pupils excluded for more than 15 days:

- in collaboration with schools, agree and implement robust procedures and practices that ensure full time, suitable education for all excluded pupils.

179. A second statutory responsibility that the authority itself recognises is not secure, is the requirement to re-integrate permanently excluded pupils quickly into mainstream schools where at all possible. This was a major weakness at the time of the 1998 inspection. While some progress has been made to re-integrate more pupils, albeit very slowly, the LEA rate of re-integration continues to be below that of similar authorities and nationally. This is clearly in conflict with the council's policy of social inclusion.

180. Nevertheless, some progress is being made. While it has taken a considerable time to put a detailed intervention and re-integration policy and strategy in place, a draft strategy is now out in schools for final consultation. Links are being made between other key plans, for example Quality Protects and EiC Plan. A re-integration team of five officers has been appointed and given clear targets for the assessment and re-integration of appropriate pupils back into mainstream. However, schools, particularly secondary schools, express confusion about the role of the team and some initial contacts have not been positive. There is as yet no policy, agreed between the LEA and the schools, for managing the re-admission procedure for excluded pupils.

181. The PRU has the responsibility for overseeing the education of permanently excluded pupils and has increased its provision to meet the requirement for full time education. The intention is to re-integrate to mainstream all Key Stage 1 and 2 pupils within a term and to increase the number of Key Stage 3 pupils who return to school from the PRU – currently at only 30 per cent. A variety of relevant strategies are being put in place to support both pupils and staff.

182. The LEA currently expects that permanently excluded Key Stage 4 pupils will remain out of mainstream under the direction of the PRU. The authority reports that past evidence suggests that many of these pupils attend better and achieve better progress than at their previous mainstream schools. Nevertheless, in the light of the requirement to re-integrate as many pupils as possible, the authority's own statement of intent in terms of social inclusion, and the need to consider the suitability of education for each individual pupil, that policy needs to be kept under review.

Recommendations

In order to improve provision for pupils out of school:

- monitor and evaluate the suitability of alternative provision for all pupils but, in particular, for Key Stage 4 pupils; and
- in collaboration with schools and other key partners, agree the mechanisms to secure the speedy re-integration of as many excluded pupils as possible into mainstream, and identify the nature, location and funding of the necessary support.

183. The LEA has been working hard to improve the amount and quality of provision for other groups of pupils out of school. For example, pregnant schoolgirls have been supported effectively in continuing their education to enable them to follow examination courses and

achieve results at Key Stage 4. There are also plans in place that will secure an increase in provision for pupils out of school for medical reasons.

Attendance

184. At the time of the last inspection support for attendance was judged to be satisfactory. The report recommended that the LEA should continue to drive up attendance levels and ensure that schools' needs for the support of the education welfare service were met. The LEA's self-evaluation indicates that satisfactory performance has been maintained and that the recommendation has been met. The schools corroborate this view in their responses to the school survey. The LEA has set itself a clear, targeted agenda in the EDP and in the Local Public Service Agreement, for action to improve attendance. Attendance data for both secondary and primary schools in 2001 indicated that they were in line with the national average. In light of the above, fieldwork was not undertaken and this inspection concludes that provision is still satisfactory.

Behaviour support

185. Support for behaviour was not covered in the previous inspection. It is now unsatisfactory.

186. In 2002, Ofsted's school inspections judged behaviour as good or satisfactory in all primary schools and good in the majority of secondary schools. In that year, the proportion of permanent exclusions from both primary and secondary schools was below the national average. However, there has been a considerable increase in permanent exclusions in secondary schools, increasing from 27 pupils in 2001 to 46 in 2002. Fixed term exclusions have also risen considerably in all types of school.

187. The LEA has set a target to reduce permanent exclusions by 2004. To achieve this it is targeting those schools with a higher incidence of exclusion, while working collaboratively with all schools to establish a comprehensive approach to behaviour support that makes good use of the expertise in schools. The Behaviour Support Plan, while needing some revision, as much has happened since it was written, presents an overarching view of where the LEA wishes to go, and it sets out the procedures and the range of support available. Earlier intervention, to improve behaviour and to reduce exclusions, has been a focus for action in a number of major plans.

188. The LEA is increasingly willing to encourage and support developments in schools and help them to build on their expertise. Mainstream schools have found beneficial a multi-disciplinary scheme to support vulnerable pupils. The impending restructuring of the support services is designed to improve the provision available to support schools on behaviour issues. The LEA is in the process of consulting on what provision schools wish to see in the future and how it is to be funded. The support given by the LEA to extending the learning support unit initiative is well judged.

189. Primary schools, on the whole, welcome the support of the central specialist support teams, which they find responsive and able to offer helpful support. They have also benefited from the training provision available, and from the work of part-time outreach support from the PRU.

190. By contrast, secondary schools have gained most from initiatives that they developed for themselves, in particular, those being supported through EiC. The role of the learning mentors and collaborative work from a special school are particularly strong. However, secondary schools have not found the support provided by the LEA's central teams to be strongly beneficial because it sometimes lacked expertise, was often not co-ordinated well with the work of other LEA teams, and did not take good account of what the schools were themselves doing.

191. The PRU has a crucial role in providing behaviour support, but some mainstream schools lack confidence in its capacity to help the more difficult pupils. A significant proportion of schools are also critical of the time taken by the behaviour support panel in making provision for pupils and of the lack of consultation and feedback when pupils are involved in joint provision with another institution. In addition to matters of timeliness, other examples were given to the inspection team of where headteachers, out of frustration with the system or the LEA's response, felt under pressure to exclude pupils in order that the pupils could then receive more appropriate support.

Health, safety, welfare and child protection

192. Health, safety, welfare and child protection were not inspected in the 1998 inspection. This inspection has shown this area of the LEA's work to be good.

193. The LEA's appointment of a health and safety co-ordinator, following a Health and Safety Executive (HSE) report in 1997, has enabled it to tackle the criticisms made by the HSE about weaknesses in planning and management systems. The LEA has policies on Health and Safety and school security, and its monitoring systems are detailed. Good guidance is available to schools to help them develop their own health and safety policies and there is an effective training programme for a variety of school staff. Training options sensibly include the implications of use of contractors and personal safety awareness for senior managers. Risk assessment procedures are in place although the LEA recognises that it has further work to do to ensure consistency.

194. Every school chooses to buy into a service level agreement from building, surveying and engineering services. This helpfully includes an annual inspection and annual maintenance with a strong health and safety emphasis.

195. The LEA meets its statutory responsibilities in relation to child protection and is very active in offering schools a range of support that goes beyond the legal requirement. There is appropriate senior representation on the area child protection committee and very good working relationships established with the key agencies, as well as with managers of a range of relevant projects and initiatives including, for example, the youth service, Sure Start, local discos and Connexions. Regular monitoring is in place to ensure that designated teachers are in place not only in schools but also in other relevant provision such as that provided for very young children. A multi-agency liaison group meets regularly to make any changes required. Effective procedures exist for monitoring and review of the council's systems.

196. Many schools report that they receive good support for child protection, and only a very small percentage report that they receive less than satisfactory support. They are particularly complimentary about the service's ability to respond to crises. The range of multi-agency training offered is comprehensive and of a high quality. It gives particular attention to the needs of vulnerable groups of pupils including those with special educational needs, looked after children and those at risk of being removed by families from school rolls without enrolling elsewhere. School staff have found the training to be informative and effective.

Looked after children

197. This aspect of the LEA's work was not covered in the previous inspection. This inspection has shown it to be highly satisfactory.

198. There has been recent improvement in the strategic and operational management of responsibilities for children who are looked after by the council. Until autumn 2002, the main focus of attention had been children in residential homes. Now, elected members, the corporate centre, and the education directorate all recognise the LEA's responsibility to promote the educational achievement of all looked after children.

199. The team responsible for supporting the education of looked after children care has been strengthened. This has increased the profile of its work, and essential data on all aspects of achievement is being collected to inform practice. The management of the team by an experienced manager seconded from social services, with joint reporting responsibilities and accountabilities to education and social services, is beginning to work well. It also demonstrates the LEA's determination to work collaboratively across services. Further work is underway to improve communication, particularly between social workers and schools, as well as to facilitate the sharing of what, until recently, has been very separate data. This separation has caused difficulties in the past and led, for example, to either duplication of effort or gaps in action. The LEA has recently audited the personal action plans that each looked after child should have, and is increasingly using these as a means of co-ordinating support to these young people.

200. The LEA recognises that the educational achievement of looked after children has been well below that of their peers and has included this as an issue in EDP2. GCSE results have been uneven from year to year, but the use of a small budget to provide additional tuition for pupils in residential homes has led to an improvement in GCSE results for this group last year. Moreover, in 2002 at Key Stage 2 the percentage of looked after children who achieved Level 4 in English and in mathematics was considerably above the average in similar authorities and nationally. There was also a small improvement in attendance but the LEA recognise they still have considerable progress to make in this area.

201. A challenging target has been set for 2003: that 75 per cent of this group of pupils achieve at least one GCSE grade. Other targets include a reduction in the absence rate and in the number of placements children experience in a year. The LEA has also set itself the task of ensuring access to a computer for all children in care placement. In addition, an innovative scheme in partnership with regional groups, gives carers access to a range of recreational and educational facilities to share with the children in their care. Steps are being taken to enable

this group of children to use musical instruments, to help an increase in self-esteem as well as the extension of educational opportunity. Overall, this is a very sound set of actions.

Measures to combat racism

202. This aspect was not covered in the previous inspection. The LEA's self-evaluation of the effectiveness of its actions to combat racism judges it to be unsatisfactory. This inspection supports that analysis. Progress in the past has been piecemeal and lacked urgency but it is at last beginning to gain momentum.

203. Over a significant period of time there appears to have been a limited understanding and acceptance of the importance of developing, resourcing, and implementing a council-wide strategy to combat racism in what had been, and still remains, a predominantly mono-cultural city. The council was slow to meet its statutory responsibilities and there are still some gaps to fill. The council has published a Race Equality Strategy but it is incomplete. Also, while the council has responded to the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence, progress has been slow, unco-ordinated, and limited in impact. For example, the requirement for all schools to record and report racist incidents to the LEA has only been in operation since after the beginning of the autumn term 2002 and, at the time of the inspection, 13 schools had not completed their returns. The LEA is therefore not in a position to use a comprehensive analysis of the extent, nature and location of racist incidents in order to inform a strategy for action. A sound policy for combating racial harassment has been drawn up, but it has only recently gone out to schools and is still in draft form.

204. An increasing change in the ethnic composition of the community, together with more recent events including violence that has been linked to racism, and some local political controversy, seem to have occasioned an increase in pace. A growing number of elected members, the corporate centre and the education directorate, are now all more active in combating racism at every level. For example, while there is not yet a detailed and secure recording of the ethnic composition of the council workforce, or a comprehensive training programme available to all its staff, including all those involved with schools, the need for both is understood and action is well on its way. Within the education directorate an experienced officer is now following up an earlier working party that had fallen into abeyance. This work is to be extended through a permanent appointment. Evidence from some of the minority ethnic communities living in Sunderland suggests that they recognise an improved willingness by the LEA recently to consult and to involve communities in collaborative activities. However, they still see that there is much to do. This includes being more proactive in involving all the different ethnic groups in education by, for example, attracting and training more minority ethnic governors and bilingual teachers.

205. A number of important actions have already been taken, some of which are making a real difference to schools and local communities. These provide examples of good practice upon which the LEA can build. Senior LEA officers have met community leaders at the Bangladeshi community centre to discuss their concerns relating to education and to explore ways of working together. A small team of staff has been appointed to work specifically with asylum seekers. Pre-nursery activities are being developed, which make use of Bengali-heritage pupils' mother tongue, and bilingual learning support assistants are being trained.

Recommendations**In order to combat racism more effectively:**

- complete the monitoring of the ethnicity of the education workforce to inform recruitment and development strategies;
- finalise the policy for combating racial harassment as a matter of urgency and establish regular and effective procedures for collection, follow up and analysis of returns of racist incidents from schools;
- agree and implement an appropriate training programme for all staff.

Section 5: Corporate issues

Summary

206. The recent corporate assessment³ found this to be an excellent council. The current inspection confirms the strength of the council's corporate vision and the steps it has taken towards successful and coherent action on regeneration. Its involvement in the Local Public Service Agreement (LPSA) provides good support to the work of the education directorate, and the continually developing work with partners is promoting early years provision, sports initiatives, and aspects of 14-19 development. The council has made a strong commitment to education in its funding policy. However, as the corporate assessment said, education is in fact the weakest aspect of the council's work. Over the last few years, the education directorate made a slow and incomplete response to the recommendations of the previous inspection report and was dilatory in taking on fully the new work expected by central government of an LEA. The council leadership and the corporate centre failed to achieve effective challenge to the education directorate on these matters.

207. To a considerable extent, the picture has changed in recent months. Leading members and the corporate centre recognised there was a need to move forward. They are now giving strong support to the new director of education and her well-founded proposals for change. Improved performance management is being introduced and the directorate is becoming more focused on effectiveness. However, some issues remain. Schools often feel the need for a clearer policy steer from elected members, for instance on SEN strategy. Moreover, the rapid development now expected of the education directorate will need careful monitoring by the corporate centre if it is to be implemented harmoniously and successfully.

Corporate planning

208. At the time of the last inspection, corporate planning for education was satisfactory. Nevertheless, the inspection team recommended that strategic management should become a higher priority for officers. That recommendation has been met at a senior level, although in some respects after long delay, but the implications have yet to affect the work of the whole directorate. A range of other, important improvements has also been made. In general, the quality of corporate planning is now good.

209. The high priority given by the council to education is evident in its corporate priorities and in the fact that spending on education has risen steadily to SSA level over the last four years. The council's plans for education are wisely set in the broader context of regeneration. The far-reaching plans in the LPSA to improve provision for young people relate satisfactorily to detailed plans for education in the education development plan (EDP). The establishment of Sure Start partnerships for early years development is based soundly on the council's identification of local needs. The area framework for local regeneration is being used sensibly as a means of planning 14-19 provision. The council's three strategic

³ City of Sunderland: Corporate Assessment. December 2002. Audit Commission.

priorities, of improving performance, developing service integration, and extending the use of ICT in local administration, are beginning to affect the education department's planning. Links with the local strategic partnership are very sound, and the recent decision by the partnership to fund an innovative proposal by the council to support eight low-achieving schools augurs well. The community and cultural services directorate provides strong support to education through its sports development programme, and the social services directorate also gives strong support on some aspects, such as Sure Start.

210. Despite these over-arching strengths, planning within the education directorate has been in need of improvement. There have been some consistently positive aspects, such as the directorate's use of external funding. However, until very recently, schools had been unclear about the LEA's sense of purpose and there was a lack of clarity in its service planning. A range of measures is now in hand to improve consultation with schools, to establish with them a common sense of purpose, and to tackle the areas of weakness in service provision. An assistant chief executive will oversee this process of change, in collaboration with stakeholders. A training programme for staff will be implemented. An external consultant is about to provide interim management for the services requiring most urgent improvement, and two headteachers are to join the directorate management team as associates. This is a good strategy, but it will need to be implemented with great care if officers used to more unsystematic ways of working, are not to lose heart. The process of improvement has already begun usefully, with conferences of senior and middle managers discussing the implications for all services of the full range of corporate and other plans affecting education. Similarly, the education directorate's contribution to the corporate plan is being made more focused.

211. There have been weaknesses in the implementation of plans and evaluation of progress, and this aspect is unsatisfactory. That so many weaknesses in the education directorate are now obvious is evidence of failures of the corporate centre in the past to monitor progress with sufficient rigour with regard to education. Corporate performance management arrangements did not ensure satisfactory progress on the recommendations of the 1998 Ofsted report. The concerns of schools, as evidenced in the survey made for this inspection, had either gone relatively unnoticed or unheeded until the past year. Too much attention may have been paid to the council's own survey of residents, which showed a very high level of satisfaction with education provision, and too little to more detailed professional analyses that were available in consultants' reports, or were potentially available in the kind of self-evaluation that has now begun.

212. Much has now improved. The corporate centre is providing additional resources to support the education directorate's programme for change and the directorate's management capacity has been increased. Moreover, since 2001, corporate performance management has become more rigorous and now includes systematic attention to performance indicators and to directorates' quality assurance. The director of education now presents an interim six-monthly report to the cabinet, and a major review of directorate performance is undertaken annually. Service plans within the education directorate are now produced to a common framework, reflecting the directorate's new list of objectives, and are subject to challenge by senior managers. However, some weaknesses continue. Officers' use and presentation of management information is still sometimes unbusinesslike: documents are often undated, and

the status of various drafts sometimes unclear. This militates against the efficient development of policy, and creates confusion within or across teams.

Recommendations

In order to ensure that the programme of change is being implemented effectively:

- the cabinet should require a four-monthly report on progress from the director of education throughout the next year;
- the corporate centre should monitor the impact of the programme of change on education directorate staff and on schools; and
- the education directorate should ensure that its documentation is systematic and is presented lucidly.

Decision making

213. Decision making was found to be unsatisfactory in the last inspection because of inadequate procedures for consulting schools. As a result of action taken belatedly last year, there has been improvement and decision making is now highly satisfactory.

214. A new policy on consultation and co-working with schools is beginning to have a positive effect. Whereas six months ago schools were dissatisfied with some aspects of consultation and lukewarm about others, there are indications that they now feel better consulted and more closely in touch with changes in policy. There is a high level of debate involving schools and officers over the funding needs of the service. Preparations are well advanced for a major conference at which the LEA will seek to agree a five-year plan with stakeholders. Nevertheless, there is a long way to go: some headteachers are unclear about fundamental matters of LEA policy and provision, not because they have not been listening but because information has not, hitherto, always been clear.

215. Decision making procedures are clear and are followed well. The director of education discusses impending policy issues with the council leadership and briefs the cabinet well. Day to day policy implementation is discussed regularly between the portfolio-holder and the director or other senior managers. Decisions are taken at the right level: delegation to officers generally operates effectively.

216. Although there has been considerable delay until recently about some key matters, the pace of change is now very rapid. Some potentially difficult decisions have been taken in the last few months, such as the use of consultants to support weak service areas. These decisions have been based on the sound use of evidence. Officers now provide good advice to elected members at a range of levels. Policy papers presented to cabinet are clear and fair, and are illuminated by a very good grasp of national policy. Thoughtful advice is given to the portfolio-holder on a routine basis. Officers generally present evidence clearly to the education review committee. There is a well-established tradition of briefings by officers for elected members on key issues.

The leadership provided by officers and elected members

217. The last inspection found the quality of leadership by senior officers to be highly satisfactory. It has declined overall since then and is now, on balance, satisfactory.

218. The chief executive has provided a clear sense of vision, and has helped to provide a strong framework of policies and priorities within which the education directorate can operate. This vision is described in the corporate assessment, which judged the city council to be excellent. That assessment, however, also judged education to be the council's weakest area, and it is now clear that challenge to the education directorate from the corporate centre after the previous Ofsted report was insufficiently effective, and this allowed many weaknesses to continue or grow. That said, the corporate centre is now giving strong support to the reforms currently underway in the directorate.

219. The quality of leadership by senior education officers has been very variable. The previous director's commitment to partnership working laid the groundwork for advances that are now being made in 14-19 provision, and at that time early steps were taken towards service integration involving education and libraries. However, there was considerable drift in strategic management after the previous inspection, affecting many aspects of the education directorate. The SEN and social inclusion functions have been slow to respond to government policy, despite extensive consultation and review, and there are still important weaknesses in these areas. The school improvement functions were slow to respond to the implications of the DfES Code of Practice, but the pace quickened and provision is now satisfactory. Important advances have been made in the provision of traded services, but even there the pace of change has been insufficiently rapid.

220. The quality of middle management varies. Some officers give an expert and purposeful lead, and work in full consultation with stakeholders. But there are also instances where a culture of unsystematic working has led to unclear messages being given to schools about policy, and to some unreliability. Sometimes, schools have found that their informal knowledge of which officer can best help them in a given situation is more useful than a grasp of official LEA policy. In addition to this, some turnover of staff led to important work being stalled. Some avoidable errors have been made. For instance, nursery schools, a great strength of the authority, were at least temporarily alienated by their experience of policy change, as budgets were devolved, traded services operated differently, and childcare provision expanded. This was a result of unclear implementation of intrinsically sound policies.

221. The directorate, under vigorous new leadership, is now moving forward on the basis of clear-headed analysis of strengths and weaknesses, and in particular a commitment to improved service performance. This new sense of direction is very widely welcomed by stakeholders. The programme of change is necessarily being introduced rapidly. However, it is important to ensure that it is also fully consolidated and takes account of the demands being made on staff.

222. The last inspection found the quality of leadership by elected members to be satisfactory. It continues to be satisfactory, though there are some aspects requiring attention.

223. The council has increased its funding commitment to education. The new leadership of the council has a clear vision for education and has given strong support to the new director, and her plans for reform. Area committees have played their part in developing policy on surplus places. The new portfolio-holder takes a strong interest in the directorate, and undertakes a considerable amount of casework, and work with external partners. However, this does not amount to a clear steer on strategy, and it is in this, as many schools complain, that elected members have, to some extent, let schools down. There has been excessive delay in providing clear, realisable policies on SEN and social inclusion, and policy on combating racism has been slow to emerge.

224. The new arrangements for scrutiny provide the basis for improved monitoring of the directorate, very necessary given the deterioration in its performance since the last inspection. The education review committee was created less than a year ago and is still finding its feet. The committee has established a programme of reviews but has yet to prove itself as an effective body.

Recommendations

In order to provide better leadership by elected members:

- the council leader should establish clear procedures so that schools receive regular and clear information about the council's policies for education;
- the council should establish clear procedures so that the education review committee's scrutiny of the implementation of education policy is frequent, rigorous and evidence-based, and includes full evaluation of the impact of policy.

Partnership

225. The LEA's partnership with other agencies was satisfactory at the time of the last inspection. The LEA's self-evaluation and fieldwork undertaken on this inspection show that it continues to be satisfactory.

226. The education department is a major contributor to the local learning partnership, and it has been prominent in taking forward the partnership's thinking about 14-19 developments, in response to the recent area-wide inspection. Its collaboration with the local further education college is long established, and is now leading to tangible developments in educational provision. It has maintained a close relationship with a local university, both at strategic and practical level, particularly aimed at increasing post-16 progression. In a broader context, the LEA has taken the imaginative step of seeking large-scale funding support from the local strategic partnership for its project to improve standards in certain schools, a proposal that has met with warm support from that body. These are indications of the LEA's growing ability to identify how it can work with external partners to mutual benefit.

227. There is also a long history of good work with the dioceses on the provision of school places, capital developments, and staffing matters. Consultation between the dioceses and the authority on LEA policy is satisfactory. However, the LEA's support for the standing

advisory committee on religious education (SACRE) has been useful but insufficiently consistent. There is uncertainty about the LEA's financial support for the SACRE, and the required annual report by SACRE was not produced last year.

228. The LEA's links with health bodies, Connexions, and the police force are generally satisfactory. The co-location of Connexions and some local authority services is potentially beneficial, and an indication of the council's commitment to integrated local provision. The LEA has worked very successfully with the primary care trust to support Healthy Schools standards, and a good range of local projects, but its commitment to some strategic working with health partnerships, for instance concerning children with disabilities, has been intermittent. The LEA works well with the police on truancy prevention. The success of the authority's commitment to the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership, and the Sure Start Partnerships, is detailed below.

229. The education department's routine liaison with the teachers' associations is sound, but there has recently been a gap in regular liaison with the non-teaching staff's union. The LEA is effective in discussing professional matters with the associations, and handles personnel issues well.

Recommendation

In order to ensure that the SACRE operates more effectively:

- provide it with a more consistent level of professional and financial support.

Support for early years

230. The support provided by the LEA for early years work was not evaluated in the previous inspection. It is now highly satisfactory. The council has a long history of developing nursery education. It maintains 10 nursery schools, including an Early Excellence Centre, and 53 primary schools have a nursery class or unit. Ofsted inspections show that all ten maintained nursery schools provide education of high quality, and under-5s in primary schools make faster progress than they do nationally.

231. On the establishment of the local Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership, the council's attention turned to supporting the partnership in its work of extending nursery and childcare provision. In this it has been very successful: there is now a free, part-time nursery place for every four- and three-year old in the city whose parent wants one, although there are difficulties of access in some areas. The DfES consequently regards the LEA as a 'universal provider'. The LEA's nursery schools have felt under some threat as alternative provision has grown at a time of falling rolls, but they have responded well to LEA policy that they extend their role by offering childcare facilities. The new director has given strong commitment to the nursery schools, and a specialist adviser has been allocated wisely to link with these schools. The council has established seven Sure Start partnerships, in line with its regeneration strategy, and there is good collaboration between directorates in supporting them.

232. The LEA's early years service has given increasingly valuable support to the partnership, although it was hampered at first by staffing vacancies. The partnership has

wisely given priority to helping private providers in identifying and meeting the needs of children with SEN, and the early years service has provided strong support in this. The LEA also disseminates some good practice in nursery education to private providers. However, its advice to the full range of providers, including its own nursery schools and classes, on implementing the Foundation Stage hit some difficulties because it was insufficiently differentiated to take account of the range of experience in different types of setting.

233. The partnership is well organised and vigorous. It meets its statutory responsibilities. It has ensured that its new development plan fits well with the EDP2. The quality and sustainability of childcare providers is secure. The partnership has clear plans for increasing the diversity of provision where this is feasible. Its arrangements for supporting the quality of provision are very sound.

234. After a difficult period, caused by lack of staffing and competing development priorities, the LEA and the partnership are now ready to move forward again.

Support for 14-19 provision

235. The LEA's support for developments in 14-19 provision is satisfactory. Its priorities, as expressed in the LPSA and the EDP, give heavy emphasis to the need to improve 14-19 year olds' achievement and participation in education or training. The council has a longstanding commitment to use its Area Framework to develop post-16 collaboration in each part of the city, and the previous director of education gave influential support to co-operation between schools and the City of Sunderland College. This is best expressed in the Washington Project, where the authority has been prominent in encouraging comprehensive schools to work together, using additional resources provided by the college, to create a broader curriculum and to ease pupils' transition to college. In addition, the LEA has been involved in useful, though isolated, developments of liaison between the college and other schools in extending vocational education at Key Stage 4, and in making special provision for some vulnerable pupils. The expertise of some officers were beneficial to these early steps forward.

236. The proportion of Key Stage 4 pupils taking vocational courses has increased recently. The work of the EiC partnership, strongly supported by the LEA, is also promoting a more diverse curriculum. The EDP2 has relevant plans for encouraging schools to broaden their curriculum further and to collaborate with each other, though these plans are expressed too generally. The authority has entered a partnership with Connexions and the college to improve its data about the post-16 cohort. All of these activities are potentially valuable, but the LEA has lacked a coherent statement of intent for this area of work. It intends to articulate this in the summer term.

237. The LEA has increased its commitment to 14-19 developments in the last few months. It has been a major contributor to the local learning partnership's comprehensive and innovative response to the area-wide inspection of post-16 provision, both in its strategic vision and its executive support to the partnership. It plays a major role in the steering group that will implement the action plans. The proposed action plan takes good account of the LEA's new strategy for school improvement, and the council's regeneration strategy. It implies changes to the role of school managers, formal partnerships between schools, capital

investment, and the expansion of ICT usage, amongst much else. In contributing strongly to this planning, the LEA has given good support and leadership to the education service.

Appendix 1: Recommendations

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

In order to provide better leadership by elected members:

- the council leader should establish clear procedures so that schools receive regular and clear information about the council's policies for education; and
- the council should establish clear procedures so that the education review committee's scrutiny of the implementation of education policy is frequent, rigorous and evidence-based, and includes full evaluation of the impact of policy.

In order to ensure that the programme of change is being implemented effectively:

- the cabinet should require a four-monthly report on progress from the director of education throughout the next year;
- the corporate centre should monitor the impact of the programme of change on education directorate staff and on schools; and
- the education directorate should ensure that its documentation is systematic and is presented lucidly.

In order to improve the quality of its self-evaluation:

- put in place a staff development programme that equips all education directorate officers to undertake self-evaluation rigorously and purposefully.

In order to secure effective improvement of services:

- evaluate the recommendations of internal reviews, consultants' reports and external inspections and, where they are implemented, require senior officers and councillors to monitor progress.

In order to improve the strategy for SEN:

- bring together all the separate plans that have a bearing on SEN inclusion into one cohesive and agreed strategic plan.

In order to ensure more reliable monitoring of progress:

- establish urgently all the planned systems for evaluating and reporting on progress on the EDP.

In order to ensure more reliable monitoring of progress:

- establish procedures for monitoring the EDP that involve more use of quantitative analysis.

In order improve support for school improvement:

- reorganise the work of the educational psychology service in order to better meet the needs of schools and pupils and to ensure that the level of resource invested in it is appropriate; and
- identify all current SEN provision and, in collaboration with schools, determine what SEN services should be provided in the future and how they will be funded.

In order to make better use of funding for SEN:

- adjust the rationale for funding SEN so that a higher proportion of the money available is brought to pupils at an earlier stage of the Code of Practice;
- introduce effective monitoring of the way in which funds delegated to schools for SEN are used to meet pupils' needs; and
- implement systems for evaluating the effects of the work of central SEN services, including the value for money they provide.

In order to meet its statutory responsibility to pupils excluded for more than 15 days:

- in collaboration with schools, agree and implement robust procedures and practices that ensure full time, suitable education for all excluded pupils.

In order to improve provision for pupils out of school:

- monitor and evaluate the suitability of alternative provision for all pupils but, in particular, for Key Stage 4 pupils; and
- in collaboration with schools and other key partners, agree the mechanisms to secure the speedy re-integration of as many excluded pupils as possible into mainstream, and identify the nature, location and funding of the necessary support.

In order to combat racism more effectively:

- finalise the policy for combating racial harassment as a matter of urgency and establish regular and effective procedures for collection, follow up and analysis of returns of racist incidents from schools.
-

In order to promote effective school self management and to support the procurement of good value services:

- prepare a comprehensive brochure of central provision and traded services and distribute it to schools in time for them to make considered purchasing decisions three months before any contract decision is required;
- offer services in a flexible way so that schools can choose to purchase the level of service that best meets their needs; and
- ensure that schools are informed how to gain information about alternative service providers.

In order to improve the planning of school places:

- ensure that plans for the removal of more primary surplus places are implemented rapidly; and
- revise the school organisation plan to include information on nursery provision and post-16 provision and the implications for school places.

In order to combat racism more effectively:

- complete the monitoring of the ethnicity of the education workforce to inform recruitment and development strategies; and
- agree and implement an appropriate training programme for all staff.

The report also makes the following recommendations. They are:

In order to secure better use of resources in schools:

- undertake systematic challenge to schools with large budget surpluses.

In order to improve the arrangements for admissions to schools:

- revise the booklets for parents to include details about admissions to voluntary aided schools and details of previous over-subscription of schools.

In order to improve support for gifted and talented pupils:

- increase the time allocated to the adviser for supporting schools and pupils; and
- establish procedures that ensure that the school improvement service evaluates all schools' provision for gifted and talented pupils as part of its normal support to schools.

In order to ensure that the SACRE operates more effectively:

- provide it with a more consistent level of professional and financial support.

Appendix 2: Record of Judgement Recording Statements for the inspection

JRS		
1.	The socio-economic context of the LEA	6
2.	The performance of schools	5
3.	Funding, including the co-ordination of external funding	4
4.	The LEA's strategy for school improvement including the EDP	4
5.	The progress on implementing the LEA's strategy for school improvement including the EDP	5
6.	The extent to which the LEA targets its resources to priorities	5
7.	The extent to which the LEA has in place effective strategies to promote continuous improvement, including Best Value	5
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 of made of performance data	4
11.	The effectiveness of LEA identification of and intervention in under-performing schools	1
12.	Support to schools for raising standards in literacy	4
13.	Support to schools for raising standards in numeracy	3
14.	Support to schools for raising standards in and the curriculum use of information and communications technology (ICT)	1

15.	Support to schools for raising standards at Key Stage 3	3
16.	Support to schools in raising standards of minority ethnic and Traveller children, including the effective deployment of the minority ethnic and Traveller achievement grants	4
17.	Support to schools for gifted and talented pupils	3
18.	Support for school leadership and management, including support for schools efforts to achieve Best Value	4
19.	Support to school governors	3
20.	The effectiveness of its services to support school management	5
a	Financial services	3
b	Human resources	2
c	Property services	3
d	Services for ICT in school administration	4
e	Cleaning and caretaking	3
f	Grounds maintenance	3
g	Catering	2
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	3
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	4
25.	The effectiveness of the performance management of services to support	4

	school improvement	
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
29.	The effectiveness of the LEA's strategy for special educational needs (SEN)	5
30.	The effectiveness of the LEA in taking steps to meet its statutory obligations in respect of SEN	4
31.	The effectiveness of the LEA in exercising its SEN functions to support school improvement	5
32.	The extent to which the LEA has exercised its SEN functions to meet the requirements of value for money	5
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	2
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	6
38.	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to school attendance	4
39.	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to behaviour at school	5
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	2

41.	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to looked after children	3
42.	The effectiveness of the LEA in combating racism	5
43.	The clarity, consistency, coherence and feasibility of corporate plans	2
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	3
46.	The quality of leadership by elected members	4
47.	The quality of leadership provided by senior officers	4
48.	The quality of advice given to elected members	2
49.	The effectiveness of the co-ordination of actions in support of priorities involving collaboration between several agencies	4

50.	The progress made by the LEA overall	6
51.	The LEA's capacity for further improvement and to address the recommendations of the report	4
52.	The overall effectiveness of the LEA	5

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