

Inspection report
SOLIHULL
Local Education Authority

Date of inspection: November 2003

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Basic information

Name of LEA:	Solihull Local Education Authority
Address of LEA:	PO Box 20 Council House SOLIHULL West Midlands
Lead inspector:	Angela Mukhopadhyay
Date of inspection:	November 2003

Introduction

1. This inspection of Solihull 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. This inspection was conducted jointly with an inspection of children's services undertaken by the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI). The inspection evidence was gathered and used by both inspection teams. Many of the judgements reported in Section 3-5 of this report have been agreed and made jointly with the SSI.

3. The inspection was based partly on documentary evidence, some of which was provided by the LEA, which included data, school inspection information, Ofsted monitoring reports, audit reports and a range of the LEA's documentation. The inspection also took into consideration discussions with elected members, officers of the local authority, representatives from LEA partners and focus groups of governors and headteachers. The LEA's self-evaluation was also used. The inspection team considered the findings of the earlier Ofsted/Audit Commission inspection of this LEA, published in December 1999. In addition, a questionnaire was circulated to schools seeking views on aspects of the work of the LEA. The response rate was 74 % and the inspection team considered the findings.

4. 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 numerical 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 numerical 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.

5. Some of the grades are used in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) profile for the education service. It is intended that the CPA for education will be updated annually, so the grades from this inspection will contribute to the next annual assessment.

6. 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 and environment, whereas this report focuses on the local authority's work to support school improvement.

Commentary

7. The Metropolitan Borough of Solihull serves an area in which two contextual factors dominate all the others. Firstly, the extremities of the social and economic context which, in a small area, range from the most affluent to the most disadvantaged nationally. Secondly, the funding is among the lowest nationally. Nevertheless the performance of schools overall is good and, in most respects, improving although not always as quickly as national rates or in line with the expectations of challenging targets. The performance of primary schools is more consistent than secondary schools. The gap in attainment, which mirrors precisely the social and economic context of the borough, is marked but since the last inspection, has closed further in primary schools than in secondary schools.

8. In the previous inspection in 1999, Solihull LEA had many notable strengths and was judged good. Its education services were prudently managed with school improvement having a very high priority and many aspects being in the vanguard of national developments. Much less effective, however, were the strategies and support for social inclusion and special educational needs. In particular, the inspection drew attention to the absence of a well-developed strategy to bridge the social and economic divide and improve the opportunities of the children who live in the disadvantaged areas in the north of the borough.

9. In the four-year period between this inspection and the previous, Solihull has undergone many changes at a time when the expectations of the effectiveness of LEAs have clarified and increased. During this period, a new corporate approach to the delivery of council services with a consequent restructuring of council directorates has been developed. The structure of the education directorate has changed and, in advance of the government's proposals, children's social services and all educational services now form a new directorate of education and children's services. However, coincidentally, these changes have been implemented when there have been a number of changes in staff.

10. Many of the strengths which existed at the time of the previous inspection have been maintained. The effectiveness of the following are good:

- the Education Development Plan;
- monitoring schools and challenging them to improve, including the use made of performance data;
- support for raising standards in literacy*;
- support for raising standards in numeracy*;
- support for raising standards at Key Stage 3;
- support to school governors*;
- financial services*;
- cleaning and caretaking;
- catering;

* No inspection fieldwork took place. The analysis of performance indicators, a survey of schools and LEA self-evaluation indicates that there has been no change in the performance since the last inspection when this function was good.

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- assuring the supply and quality of teachers;
 - the deployment, performance management, strategic planning, expertise and value for money of services to support school improvement;
 - the steps taken to meet statutory obligations in respect of special educational needs;
 - the provision of school places*;
 - asset management planning;
 - admissions to schools*;
 - school attendance;
 - support for the education of looked after children; and
 - collaboration between agencies.

11. The following are unsatisfactory;

- the exercise of SEN functions to meet the requirements of value for money;
- the training of designated teachers for child protection; and
- registering of an education unit as a pupil referral unit¹.

12. Overall the LEA has made highly satisfactory progress since the previous inspection. Significant and sustainable improvements have been taken to devise and implement a strategy for special educational needs. In other respects, the structures have been established and the resources assembled as the necessary prelude to change. New resources have been obtained to regenerate the disadvantaged north of the borough and plans are at an early stage of implementation. The directorate of education and children's services is well placed to deliver the government's proposals in the Green Paper *Every Child Matters*. However, planning, to make the most of this structural change and provide integrated education and children's services is at an early stage.

13. The move to a single directorate of education and children's services is well supported by schools and stakeholders. Not all the other changes in the corporate direction of the council have been as well understood or seen as relevant to schools. Relationships with schools are never less than satisfactory and the LEA's support for school improvement remains consistently satisfactory and often good. However, within the context of the number of changes, schools perceive some reduction in the clarity and focus of the strategy for school improvement.

14. There is sufficient capacity to respond to the recommendations of this inspection, although the new senior management team is small when matched to the extent of changes which are planned and when compared with the range and extent of the directorate's functions. Its capacity has been reduced over the past year by vacancies and sickness although arrangements were made to cover the vacancies with suitably qualified staff. There are also, significant strengths among the third tier officers. The education CPA rates Solihull LEA as good. This inspection took place when the LEA is in transition and the new arrangements require consolidation to have their full impact. The overall effectiveness of the LEA is nevertheless highly satisfactory.

¹ Following the completion of the fieldwork for this inspection, the LEA took appropriate steps to register the pupil referral unit with the Department for Education and Skills.

Section 1: The LEA's strategy for school improvement

Context

15. The Metropolitan Borough of Solihull is situated at the southerly edge of the West Midlands conurbation. It borders Birmingham in the north and Warwickshire in the south. It is largely affluent, although four wards in the north of the borough are among the most disadvantaged nationally. Solihull also includes rural areas where the local circumstances differ significantly from both the affluence of the urban areas of the south and the characteristics of the north, where inner city poverty and limited opportunity are endemic. The variation in the social and economic context is extreme and is illustrated by the gap of eight years in the average life expectancy between the north and south of the borough. It is made even more stark by the comparatively small size of the borough consisting of only 17 electoral wards.

16. The local economy is expanding with the potential for the creation of 30,000 new jobs over the next ten years. Land Rover is the largest employer with around 10,000 employees although 98% of local businesses employ between one and 49 employees. Unemployment at 2.5% is low, but higher in the north of the borough at 5.7% per cent. Only 5% of jobs are located in the northern part compared with 20 per cent of the population. Transport remains the key factor in the success of the borough's economy. Solihull is situated with easy access to the national motorway network and Birmingham Airport is within its boundaries.

17. The population has declined by 3% since the last inspection and is about 199,500, with approximately 20% under the age of 16. The percentage of young people up to the age of 19 from black and other minority ethnic backgrounds is low, at 8.5%. 3.7% of pupils and students have English as an additional language; 0.23% are being looked after and 2.6% have a statement of special educational needs (SEN). There has been a significant rise in the number of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum.

18. Education is provided through 42 primary schools, 14 infant and 12 junior schools, five special schools, three pupil referral units, four 11-18 secondary schools and nine 11-16 schools. All but one of the primary schools with an infant department have a nursery unit. Solihull schools are popular and currently 16% of pupils attending the schools live in neighbouring authorities. At secondary transfer, a proportion of young people enter either the private or grammar schools or the city technology college, which is situated in the north of the borough. The number of surplus places is low but there has been a reduction in the birth rate over the last 10 years which is creating surplus places in some primary schools especially in the north of the borough.

19. Solihull's Early Years and Child Care Development Partnership (EYCDP) is expected to exceed its strategic target for establishing new nursery places between 2001-04. A key priority is the development of six new neighbourhood nurseries and children's centres. The local Learning and Skills Council covers the Birmingham and Solihull areas. Solihull College and Solihull Sixth Form College are located in the south of the borough. Schools with sixth forms are predominantly located in the north of the borough. Some of these sixth forms are comparatively small.

Performance

20. Standards of attainment are good overall, although results do not consistently meet challenging targets. Results in National Curriculum assessments in core subjects at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 are consistently higher than the national averages and in line with those in similar authorities². The proportion of pupils obtaining five or more passes at grades A*-C is higher than national averages and in line with similar authorities. However, the percentages of pupils gaining five or more and one or more General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) passes at grades A*-G are barely satisfactory. Attainment of students in General Certificate of Education (GCE) advanced level and General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) are lower than those in similar authorities and national averages. However, the results only reflect a small percentage of the students who remain at school for post-16 qualifications.

21. Standards of attainment remain high at Key Stage 1. At Key Stages 2 and 3, results have improved in mathematics but not consistently so in English. At GCSE, the percentage of pupils obtaining five or more passes at grades A* - C is improving faster than the national rate; the percentage of pupils obtaining five or more passes at grades A* - G is improving, but lower than the national rate. The percentage of pupils obtaining one or more passes at grade A* - G is fairly static.

22. Ofsted section 10 inspections of schools show a similar picture to the National Curriculum assessment and GCSE results. In the most recent inspection of primary schools, 80.4% of schools are very good or good overall compared with 72.3% nationally. This represents a considerable improvement between the most recent and previous inspection. The percentage of secondary schools which are very good or good is similar to the percentage nationally. However, the comparison between the latest and previous school inspection grades does not show a consistent picture of improvement across all secondary schools.

23. The gap between the social and economic contexts of the north and south of the borough is also reflected in the standards of attainment. Analysis of results shows that the gap still exists, but has reduced, particularly by the end of the primary phase. The gap between secondary school attainment has closed marginally but pupils still make insufficient progress against their previous attainment in the three of the secondary schools in the north of the borough.

24. Currently one secondary school requires special measures and one special school has serious weaknesses. Nine schools have been designated as Beacon schools.

25. Rates of attendance in both primary and secondary schools are good overall. Rates of exclusion are in line with those nationally.

² The LEA's similar authorities are Trafford, Stockport, Bromley, Bury, Southend, Sefton, Bedfordshire, Warrington, Sutton and Hertfordshire

Council structure

26. The council is made up of 17 wards, each of which has three members. In the most recent local government elections, the Conservative party held an overall majority of five seats and 15 seats more than the nearest opposition party.

27. Since the last inspection, the council has modernised its political structures with a leader and cabinet and a number of overview and scrutiny boards. The cabinet consists of the leader and seven cabinet members, one of whom is for education and children's services. An overview and scrutiny board is established for education and children.

28. In October 2002, following consultation, the council restructured its departments forming six corporate directorates including a directorate of public health, funded jointly with the health authority. The new structure created the new directorate of education and children's services, which includes education and children's social care services. This directorate has three divisions: children and young people, school improvement, performance and partnership, and social regeneration and learning strategy.

Funding

29. Solihull is one of the lowest funded LEAs in the country. The 2002-03 education Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) for primary pupils in Solihull, at £2,461 per pupil, was lower than the SSA for metropolitan districts' (£2,668), its statistical neighbours (£2,634) and the English average (£2,797). Similarly, it was lower for secondary pupils at £3,119 per pupil compared with metropolitan districts (£3,423), its statistical neighbours (£3,355) and the English average (£3,582). SSA funding per pupil was the lowest of all metropolitan districts at secondary level and lowest but one at primary level.

30. Until the current financial year, the council had consistently spent slightly above the education SSA. The total education budget in 2002-03 was £98.6 million, marginally higher than the SSA. The percentage spend above government guidelines has reduced in this current financial year and, at £108.6 million, now stands just below the Education Funding Support Settlement (EFSS). This represents 0.2% above the EFSS level for schools.

31. Centrally retained funding in 2002-03, at £391 per pupil, was close to the metropolitan district average of £393 per pupil and Solihull's statistical neighbours' average of £396, but below the national average of £421. The distribution of central spending was close to comparator groups.

	Solihull £ per pupil	Metropolitan Districts £ per pupil	Statistical Neighbours £ per pupil	England £ per pupil
Strategic management	115	120	79	101
Special education	150	143	174	160
School improvement	27	28	26	30
Access	99	102	117	130

Data source: CIPFA education budget statistics 2002/03

32. The funding per pupil delegated to schools was well below all comparator groups.

	Solihull £ per pupil	Metropolitan Districts £ per pupil	Statistical Neighbours £ per pupil	England £ per pupil
Primary individual schools budget (ISB)	1,947	2,121	2,110	2,223
Secondary (ISB)	2,581	2,784	2,830	2,929

Data source: CIPFA Education Budget Statistics 2002/03.

33. The capital programme for 2003-04 is £22.3 million, 50% of which is funded mainly through capital grants.

34. The council took up all its Standards Fund allowance in 2002-03 and has taken advantage of opportunities for obtaining external funding. Solihull has been successful in attracting funding for education and children's services from such sources as the Excellence Cluster, the Leadership Incentive Grant, the Behaviour Improvement Programme, New Opportunities Fund (NOF) and Sports England.

The LEA's strategy for school improvement

35. The LEA's strategy for school improvement was good at the time of the last inspection and it remains so. The second Education Development Plan (EDP2) is clear and well organised. It addresses national priorities very well. It builds on a sound evaluation of EDP1 and an analysis of local needs. Targets for 2004 remain challenging. There is a clear link between actions, activities, priorities and success criteria.

36. Good characteristics include annual up-dating with some new features to help schools understand the plan. These include a clear statement of new activities together with a section which identifies the qualities of good schools. These are clearly cross-referenced to aspects of the plan which support the development of these qualities. The plan is very large

and comprehensive. It covers in some way or other nearly every aspect of support to schools, as a result, the actual priorities do not clearly emerge.

37. In addition to the EDP2, the LEA has had significant success in bidding for new initiatives which will benefit predominantly, the north of the borough and, when implemented, should provide the impetus to raise obdurately low standards. Officers and members have a clear understanding of the links between school improvement and social inclusion and recognise that raising standards in the north of the borough requires community development and regeneration as well as support and attention to raising standards in schools. Recent national initiatives such as the Excellence Cluster, the Leadership Incentive Grant, an extended schools network, Sure Start and the Behaviour Improvement Programme are, for the most part, all at an early stage in development. The strategic headlines for all these initiatives are complementary to the EDP2 and together they form a coherent and comprehensive school improvement strategy.

38. The implementation of the EDP2 is highly satisfactory. Progress is monitored every six months. Monitoring includes schools' perceptions as well as an analysis by the priority leaders. Any slippage is identified at this stage. Evaluation of the progress following the first year of EDP2 is sound but of variable quality. Sometimes the weaknesses which have been identified are too easily accepted without a rigorous interrogation of how they can be improved. There are, however, some good examples of self-evaluation. School strand coordinators who contribute to Excellence in Cities have worked with inspectors to evaluate the work taking place. In this example, the process of the evaluation, as well as its result, has clarified expectations for teachers and helped them to identify areas for improvement.

The allocation of resources to priorities

39. This is highly satisfactory. At the time of the previous inspection, it was good. The rate of delegation to schools has remained static since the previous inspection. Deployment of funds to schools in disadvantaged circumstances is limited in the current formula but this is partly attributed to the low base unit allocation which the authority receives per pupil. However, there has been some success in the reduction of school balances and only six primary and one special school now have surpluses in excess of 10 per cent of their annual budget.

40. The schools' funding formula was one of the first of its kind nationally. It has been simplified but it remains complex and lacks transparency. Primary and secondary schools rate the education rationale behind the funding formula as poor. The LEA has recognised that it requires revision and has undertaken to do this through the work of the Solihull schools forum.

41. The council's priority for education is reflected in the way in which education SSA/FSS increases have been passed on to the education service and to schools. The budget process includes an element of in-depth review of current and future spending needs. Baseline budgeting and a three-year budget strategy have a high council priority and form two of the four on going council projects. An evidence-based review of all budgets and a realignment of unallocated funds against priorities have taken place this year. External funding and service savings are targeted to priority areas, such as education and social

services. The council has supported its priorities by regularly increasing the council tax, in addition to increasing capacity by maximising the benefits of partnership work. The council tax remains the lowest in the West Midlands.

42. Service savings are directed to two improvement priorities within the education and children's services directorate: improving educational achievement in all schools especially underperforming schools, and achieving a two-star Social Services Inspectorate (SSI) rating for children's services. Within this integrated directorate, examples where funding streams have been pooled, such as for residential placements and a multi-disciplinary centre. However, there is more potential for pooling, for example the better co-ordination of preventive services to support children in need.

43. At the time of the previous inspection, delegation of funding to schools was high. Although the LEA has sustained its delegation rate it is now, at 85%, below average. In 2002-03, schools deferred the delegation of funding for support assistants for statemented pupils. This was partly because schools had concerns about receiving the estimated budget rather than the actual cost and partly, because of uncertainties about the financial impact of introducing single status.

44. Similarly, in 2002-03, at 73%, Solihull devolved a lower than the national average (77%) amount of the Standards Fund. Nevertheless, the comparative total costs for centrally provided services, although increased in 2002-03, were also below the national average. The council has improved its success in bidding for external funding and has used this money to develop strategies which have the potential to close the gap in attainment between schools in the borough.

45. Solihull has good procedures for budget monitoring with appropriately structured and controlled levels of delegation to budget holders. Monitoring has not been taking place as regularly as planned, since the budget holders and the core finance team are supposed to monitor on a monthly basis and training for that purpose is provided. Pressure has been placed on these budget monitoring processes by the various corporate change programmes, such as work on the Joint Venture Company. Councillors do, however, receive quarterly reports and projections. A section of the special educational needs (SEN) budget has been significantly overspent in the last few years but in other respects budget setting is generally accurate.

Strategies to promote continuous improvement, including Best Value

46. Strategies to promote continuous improvement are highly satisfactory. These were good at the time of the previous inspection but, nationally, the expectations of the requirements of this function have increased significantly since then. The council has responded positively to criticisms of its performance management in the Audit Commission's corporate assessment (December 2002). A corporate planning and performance management system has been introduced and is in its first cycle. Good systems are now in place to promote continuous improvement, though they have yet to have their full effect.

47. Providing good value services is one of Solihull's five council objectives. The current performance management framework links corporate objectives to directorate and

divisional performance plans. However, although detailed staff appraisals are in place, personal targets are not always explicitly linked to these higher level plans.

48. The Best Value Performance Plan is clear and was judged adequate by external auditors, with little adverse comment. Corporate Best Value guidance is well developed and reviews have been rigorous. Improvement plans which are drafted following the completion of the reviews are generally detailed but they lack costings and milestones.

49. Best Value principles are increasingly being used to assess performance outside the formal review programme. The authority has adjusted the former unwieldy review programme and reduced the number of reviews so that it can focus on its change themes and major projects. Effort is rightly being concentrated on the improvement plans from previous reviews. In addition, councillors, on scrutiny panels, have developed task and finish scrutiny reviews. These look in detail, along the lines required for Best Value, at key areas of interest, for instance school places and admissions. These reviews inform future plans effectively.

50. Within the education and children's services directorate, several reviews have been completed and have led to improved and more efficient service delivery, such as SEN statementing, where the number of tribunals has fallen and the number of statements issued within statutory timescales has improved.

51. Action has been taken which will enhance the capacity to improve in this area. The directorate has recently appointed a performance lead officer. Priority performance indicators have been agreed, which are monitored on a monthly basis and reviewed annually. The LEA's self-evaluation undertaken for this inspection demonstrates a clear understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. Some services make very good use of regular and small-scale self-evaluations to inform improvements. For instance, the education unit which provides support for the education of looked after children regularly undertakes small-scale evaluations, such as a review of personal education plans, a questionnaire completed by the children and young people and an analysis of examination results. These are used to make improvements, based on an informed understanding of strengths and weaknesses.

Section 2: Support for school improvement

Summary

52. All functions are discharged effectively. Services are well organised and managed. The work of the pastoral inspectors is consistently good and very well regarded by most schools. Procedures for monitoring and challenging schools have been reviewed and now clearly contribute to the schools' entitlement to support. The quality and range of performance data have improved. Support for the major national school improvement strategies is good. There have been a number of changes in leadership, the implementation of a number of corporate initiatives and in the organisation of services. In view of these circumstances, schools perceive that these have detracted somewhat from the priority for and focus on school improvement. There is, however, unequivocal support from schools and stakeholders for the integration of education and children's social services.

The effectiveness of services to support school improvement

53. As in the previous inspection, services to support school improvement are good, provide good value for money, and undoubtedly make a difference to schools.

54. Leadership of services to support school improvement is highly satisfactory. Individual services are well led and managed; monitoring and evaluation are fundamental to performance review, and are used productively to inform progress against targets. Building on opportunities created from the joint department, examples of well co-ordinated initiatives are beginning to emerge.

55. Many changes are being made across the council at a time when the leadership of the school improvement services has been in transition. A new head of the school improvement and partnership division has taken up post recently. Consultation is taking place over the delivery of services and major changes have been made to the annual review of schools. Despite two key vacancies which stretched leadership capacity, acting senior management has ensured progress against plans remains on track. Priorities within the EDP2 have continued to drive improvement and at the same time, joint work has taken place with schools in a number of key areas. Headteachers' support for the LEA's efforts to improve schools has been maintained. Despite this, some schools perceive that during this period of transition, the priority for school improvement has slipped in its importance.

56. Staff are effectively deployed. Individual expertise is well used, and furthered by good opportunities for the exchange of successful practice with colleagues. Increasing use of the expertise of the inspection and advisory service is beginning to permeate services, for example in planning for extended schools. Although a good range of expertise is available to schools, the appointment of an associate headteacher to support leadership and management development has strengthened capacity. Leading teachers are used effectively to enable a rapid response to requests for support.

57. Strategic planning of services to support school improvement is thorough, and overall of high quality. Service plans contribute significantly to the council's objectives, are

well prioritised, and link together in a consistent way. Within the best plans, maximising inclusion, raising achievement and cross-divisional and multi-agency working are significant features, together with explicit costs, timescales and outcomes.

58. Good procedures are in place for managing the performance of services and for assuring quality. Appraisal is regular and thorough. It addresses inconsistency and is firmly linked to continuing professional development in line with service planning. National standards for school improvement professionals sensibly underpin individual objectives for inspectors and advisory staff. The shift of focus from the EDP2 to the divisional performance plan will further promote joint working with other divisions. Procedures for the induction of newly-appointed inspectors and advisory staff are comprehensive, demand high performance, and include good provision for mentoring.

59. Staff are well qualified, expert, knowledgeable and have high credibility. The needs of the different phases of education are well reflected within the service as a whole, as well as senior management experience in schools. Recent appointments have strengthened the LEA's capacity to manage schools in challenging circumstances as well as strengthening expertise in special education. Good use is made of consultancy and secondments to ensure continuing expertise, and the current review of the role of inspectors is deliberately structured to ensure the expertise is used to full effect. Monthly meetings of divisional staff and cross-divisional training successfully maintain and promote expertise. This enables the school improvement, performance and partnership division to align its work with broader corporate objectives and develop closer working with other services.

Monitoring, challenge and intervention

60. Procedures for monitoring, challenge and intervention continue to be highly satisfactory as they were at the time of the previous inspection. At that time annual reviews were conducted with insufficient involvement of governors and some schools were unclear on how strategies for intervention would affect them. These criticisms have been addressed and improvements have been made in annual reviews.

61. The LEA has worked successfully with headteachers to revise procedures, so that its responsibilities to monitor and challenge schools are separate from the provision of support which schools purchase. The annual reviews are now firmly rooted in good quality performance and management data, are securely based on self-evaluation and reflect the requirements of external inspection. This has served to target intervention more effectively. Governing bodies now receive clear and useful summaries of progress which highlight areas of concern. The implications for intervention are well understood.

62. These arrangements are new. The vast majority of headteachers rightly value highly both the challenge and support currently offered from the pastoral inspectors who are attached to clusters of schools. Some headteachers who took part in the discussions during this inspection are, however, confused by the extent of their entitlement as, previously, the annual review was purchased by schools as part of a buy-back package. Careful consultation is under way for separating the function of monitoring, challenge and intervention through the annual review of performance from the support which the school purchases. This is welcomed by headteachers. Changes will result in a more appropriate title for the role,

maximise the match of specialist expertise to the needs of schools, and strengthen the monitoring and challenge function of the LEA.

The focusing of LEA support on areas of greatest need

63. The way in which the LEA focuses support on areas of greatest need remains good. Effective use of performance data and management information results in good targeting of support and resources to schools facing challenging circumstances, under-performing, or in need of additional support. A suitably broad range of criteria is used to identify schools of local concern. Each school's needs are analysed in detail and bands of additional support allocated accordingly.

64. Although this differentiation is generally accepted by most schools, it is still controversial with some headteachers, for example those who still have concerns that support to schools in the north of the borough risks unbalancing the support available elsewhere. One aspect of support has not been modernised and continues to be allocated to all schools, regardless of need. Liaison officers attend every full meeting of school governing bodies as the Director's representative and with the role of providing communication between governing bodies and the directorate.

Recommendation

In order to target all support to areas of greatest need:

- modernise the role of liaison officers so that their attendance at meetings of governing bodies is proportionate to the needs of the school.

The effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring schools and challenging them to improve, including the use made of performance data

65. The LEA's performance in this function is good. It was highly satisfactory in the previous inspection. Good progress has been made in the availability and better use of performance, contextual and comparative data. More recently, value-added data have considerably strengthened challenge, raised expectations and improved target-setting.

66. Schools are well supported by pastoral inspectors and most are clear about the monitoring which is an entitlement and that which is additional as a consequence of intervention. Good monitoring and challenge are now generally effective at identifying weaknesses at a sufficiently early stage. Procedures for the annual review of schools and careful monitoring of the impact of national strategies, supplemented by good communications between officers which include a range of information held by other services, enable the LEA to remain vigilant. Reports to headteachers and governors are clear and helpful in securing improvement.

67. Monthly review meetings ensure officers are fully aware of the range and nature of support allocated to individual schools and enable a rapid response to concerns, for example, in guiding the deployment of an associate headteacher. This particularly focuses on the issues of school performance which are defined in section 10 school inspection. However,

the school improvement, performance and partnership division is gradually increasing the possibilities for joint work between teams, for example on extended schools, the Excellence Cluster and for pupils with SEN. This is resulting in the more efficient use of resources. Nevertheless, there are issues identified within this report which affect particular schools and where early discussion with, and challenge to, those schools have been insufficient. These include the training of designated teachers, the admission to schools of unaccompanied minors who are asylum seekers, the increase in the rate of fixed-term exclusions and improvements in the school's procurement policies.

The effectiveness of the LEA's work with underperforming schools

68. Identification of and intervention in underperforming schools are highly satisfactory. They were satisfactory in the previous inspection when intervention strategies were appropriate and very effective support was provided for schools in special measures. The number of primary, secondary and special schools which have been found to require significant improvement in their most recent Ofsted section 10 inspection is low. The percentage of schools which have required special measures since 1993 is in line with the national rate.

69. In 2001, two primary schools were identified by Ofsted as having serious weaknesses, and a special school, underachieving in 2000, was found to have serious weaknesses on re-inspection in 2002. Important lessons were learned about timely intervention and procedures were reviewed. Both primary schools with serious weaknesses have made good progress and no longer have serious weaknesses. In line with the LEA's procedures, they will continue to receive additional support to ensure sustained improvement. The third special school continues to make good progress. In 2003, despite a high level of support, a secondary school, which was already a cause of local concern and in challenging circumstances, required special measures.

70. Work in schools of local concern and in those with serious weaknesses, and in the school in need of special measures, is well-targeted. Leadership has been strengthened, and the majority of schools are making at least satisfactory progress. Support is well planned and co-ordinated, and subject to thorough monitoring and regular review. Inspectors work successfully with headteachers in integrating additional support from the LEA into school improvement plans, and monitoring incorporates interventions from the LEA as well as actions initiated by schools.

71. The education and children's services overview and scrutiny board has resolved to scrutinise the LEA's procedures for monitoring, challenge and intervention and improve the role of elected members in monitoring the progress of schools causing concern.

Support for literacy and numeracy

72. At the time of the previous inspection, the LEA's support for raising standards in literacy and numeracy was good. The LEA's self-evaluation, the school survey and the results of National Curriculum assessments show the effectiveness of the support has not changed since the first inspection. No fieldwork was carried out in this inspection.

Support for information and communication technology

73. Support for information and communication technology (ICT) in the curriculum remains satisfactory. The LEA has satisfactorily met the recommendation in the previous inspection report to provide schools with the support they need in implementing the ICT strategy. There have been difficulties in recruiting suitably qualified advisory support but all posts are now filled with well-qualified and enthusiastic staff.

74. The authority is not yet able to collate accurate and reliable data on the performance of individual pupils at Key Stages 1 and 2 because there is still too much variability in the capacity of schools to assess accurately the levels of performance of all pupils. This is being addressed appropriately, through targeted support for school co-ordinators and the promotion of a new national quality standards award. The LEA has a good knowledge of the progress made in secondary schools. Significant work is being carried out through the Key Stage 3 Strategy to improve the reliability of assessment but LEA advisers are not confident that the very ambitious Key Stage 3 targets set for 2004 will be met. At Key Stage 4, the percentage of pupils successfully completing accredited ICT courses has risen from 34% in 2002 to 45% in 2003.

75. There is a sound plan for the development of ICT which is understood by schools. The ICT strategy has been further developed over the last two years but links between the curriculum use of ICT and its use in management and administration remains underdeveloped. The Key Stage 3 strategy provides much needed additional capacity and structure to the assessment of ICT in schools and there is now a highly satisfactory focus on raising attainment.

76. The National Grid for Learning (NGfL) has been well managed within the resources available. Schools understand the requirements for detailed action planning and the process for allocating resources has been good. However, many schools have started from a very low base line of resource for the number of computers in relation to pupil ratios. Schools report a recent improvement in the quality of the technical support available. However, the quality of the support has been too variable and a number of schools have been dissatisfied.

77. The LEA's management of training provided by funding from the New Opportunities Fund has been good. While some difficulties have been experienced in gaining commitment from some secondary schools, training for teachers in the primary and secondary phase has been well received and has resulted in much greater use of ICT in classrooms and across the curriculum. A large number of primary teachers have completed portfolios of competence.

78. The quality of additional training provided by the advisory service is highly regarded and is having a beneficial effect on ICT in schools. In particular, there is good support for the development of ICT in a range of subjects. The dissemination of good practice has been underdeveloped until recently. This has become a key objective for the LEA through the development of the Solihull grid for learning web site.

Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3

79. This was not inspected in the previous inspection. Support is well managed, properly targeted and of good quality. Performance in national tests at Key Stage 3 is above the national average and improving in both mathematics and science but recent results in English have been disappointing. Following a detailed evaluation of this, the Key Stage 3 team is re-focusing its work with the schools where results are too low and where pupils have made limited progress.

80. The targets set for 2004 are very challenging and significant improvement is required, if they are to be achieved. However, the LEA is confident that most targets will be met. The LEA now provides very good quality end of key stage data on the performance of pupils, including on the value added from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3. This is being used well to challenge performance in individual schools.

81. The LEA has maintained a strong team of consultants. All secondary schools have made a satisfactory start to implementing all the various strands to the strategy. Under very able leadership, training has been well received and consultants make a positive impact in many of the schools.

82. Continuity between the literacy and numeracy strategies for Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 is good. Improving the transition between primary and secondary schools is a priority in both strategies. The LEA is helping schools develop cross-curricular approaches to teaching and learning.

Support for minority ethnic groups, including Travellers

83. Policies and guidance for minority ethnic and Traveller children are highly satisfactory. Support was unsatisfactory in the previous inspection and the systematic collection and analysis of data to improve the targeting of resources were recommended. In response, a major review of systems for the collection of data has taken place and satisfactory progress has been made.

84. Monitoring of the achievement of minority ethnic pupils by schools is improving, but is still not conducted by all schools. In 1999, only 15% of schools monitored achievement. The LEA provided guidance and challenge as part of the annual review of schools and this figure rose to 84% in 2002. Monitoring, although made difficult because of the small numbers of pupils, has identified some underachievement of pupils from minority ethnic groups at Key Stage 2 and this becomes more pronounced at Key Stage 3. Guidance has been issued to schools, but there is no properly constituted strategy for further action to raise the attainment of these groups.

85. Similarly, pupil exclusion data indicate a disproportionate number of fixed-term exclusions of pupils from Black Caribbean, mixed white and Black Caribbean ethnic backgrounds. Attendance and post-16 destination data are not yet sufficient to enable detailed analysis.

Recommendation**In order to improve support to pupils from minority groups:**

- devise and implement strategies and initiatives to raise the standards of attainment and behaviour of underachieving Black and mixed ethnic backgrounds.

86. Schools receive strong support, together with helpful and practical advice, from the small team working with pupils who have English as an additional language. This comprises an initial assessment of need, thorough monitoring of progress, short-term in-class assistance, and useful training.

87. The West Midlands Consortium Education Service for Travelling Children provides authoritative guidance and high quality expertise to schools. Support includes a rapid response to mobile children returning to the borough, home visiting and distance learning. Good multi-agency support is provided, particularly from the education welfare service which is firmly focused on improving attendance and encouraging successful transfer from primary to secondary schools. Criteria for the use of the Travellers Achievement Grant are very clear.

88. Over 20 pupils from asylum seeking families have settled successfully in schools, assisted by additional funding for mid-year arrivals and good advice from officers. Centrally-provided support for those pupils with English as an additional language is provided, although the team faces constraints because it is small and the provision of support is made difficult because of the dispersal of the children. There are difficulties in finding appropriate school places in a timely way for unaccompanied minors. (See Section 4 of this report on the provision for pupils who have no school place.)

Support for gifted and talented pupils

89. LEA support for gifted and talented pupils is satisfactory. It was not inspected in the previous inspection. Targets have been set for the percentages of pupils gaining level 5 or above at Key Stage 2. Plans in the EDP are not sufficiently detailed. However, there is an emerging approach which is based primarily on the developments undertaken by schools working within Excellence in Cities (EiC) and the new Excellence Cluster. Plans for literacy and numeracy support targeted at more able pupils are appropriate.

90. Current developments, while of good quality, tend to be clustered in particular areas and schools, and there is a variability in take-up. In consequence, while a good guidance document has been shared with schools, the support does not constitute an integrated strategy which has an impact across the whole borough. Where the initiatives have taken place, they are well co-ordinated and evaluated appropriately. Several well-run activities have been organised for more able learners. For the last three years, enrichment sessions for Year 6 pupils have benefited with nearly 300 pupils attending annually. There is a very organised programme of fully recruited summer schools.

91. The LEA has developed criteria for identifying gifted and talented pupils which have been developed and applied across some secondary schools. Schools are challenged about

their provision through the annual review process. However, the LEA does not keep a register of identified gifted and talented pupils, but each school is expected to have mechanisms for identifying more able learners.

92. Support is co-ordinated through two inspectors who provide good leadership. Subject and national strategy teams share responsibility for developing a clear focus on gifted and talented pupils. Very good work is emerging from some of these teams. The extent to which the inspectors can draw all the work together and develop an integrated strategy is constrained by the lack of time allocated to this area of work.

Recommendations

In order to improve the support provided for schools for their gifted and talented pupils the LEA should:

- build on all the elements of good practice in the borough and establish a policy and strategy which will ensure that all schools develop in line with the Solihull guidelines;
- monitor the implementation of the policy and guidelines and track the progress being made by pupils designated as gifted and talented in each school.

Support for school leadership and management including support for schools to achieve Best Value

93. This is highly satisfactory. It was judged to be good in the previous inspection. The LEA has addressed the recommendations contained in the previous inspection report. Notes following adviser visits have become more incisive about management and these are communicated to governors. High standards of support have continued but, despite some careful analysis of the information gained from monitoring schools' needs, a number of key aspects are not well developed, such as disseminating good practice and promoting more challenging approaches to procurement.

94. The elements of a good leadership and development strategy are in place, such as the induction of newly-appointed headteachers and the provision of benchmarked performance data. The Leadership Incentive Grant is being used productively to improve school leadership and management in a comprehensive way in the schools in the north of the borough. Important strands of a strategy are contained within the EDP2 and in the rigorous approach to school self-evaluation. However, the whole strategy has yet to be set out in one document and, as a consequence, is unclear to schools. For instance, while the LEA views the self-evaluation process of the annual review as central to developing school leadership and management, many schools have not made links with their own leadership and management developments and consider this simply as the LEA's approach to monitoring.

95. The senior staff of the authority have rightly identified the quality of leadership and management in the borough's schools as one of the key factors in bringing about further improvements in the standards achieved in schools. There is a clear vision for involving headteachers of self-managing schools as key players in transforming education in all parts of

the borough. The LEA has tried hard to engage headteachers in the changes that are being introduced. Some headteachers identified the leadership days run jointly for headteachers and senior officers in the authority as a good example of this. The majority of headteachers are fully behind this approach but are unsure how the Solihull vision will be put into practice.

96. While good advice has been given on what Best Value means to schools, the LEA places insufficient emphasis on challenging schools over their purchasing decisions and strategies.

Support for governors

97. At the time of the previous inspection, the LEA's support for school governors was judged to be good. The LEA's self-evaluation and the school survey confirm that the quality of support has been maintained. No fieldwork was carried out.

The effectiveness of services to support school management

98. At the time of the previous inspection, although individual services were inspected, no judgement was made on the overall effectiveness of services to support school management. The effectiveness of services to support school management is now satisfactory although there are weaknesses.

99. The services which support schools with management tasks have benefited from a variety of consultative and evaluative processes. A more strategic overview has been delayed because preparations to secure a strategic partner and form a joint venture company have not come to fruition. A priority of the council's transformation strategy is to put the customer at the heart of the council's work and to provide services to schools through one point of access. However, too much reliance has been placed on the success of the joint venture company. Nevertheless, the council is using the work, which has already been carried out in preparation for these strategic partnership arrangements, to make improvements.

100. Currently, individual services provide clear details of the service they offer to schools but these are not available in a consistent way in a single document. Schools generally have sufficient information to make an informed choice, although costs are notified separately for some services. Performance is monitored effectively and complaints are followed up efficiently. Service level agreements with schools are functional and offer some choice about the level and range on offer. Prices are based on historic allocations and do not always relate to the real cost of the service. The LEA does not provide any information on entitlement to core services from centrally-retained funds or on the range of services available from the council.

101. Nevertheless, there is a high level of purchase of services by schools and they are, in general, satisfied with LEA service specification and LEA support in procuring high quality services. Schools which do not buy the LEA's services can still obtain advice, but the authority is not doing enough to help schools become confident, informed purchasers. The LEA has been slow to develop its role as a broker as well as a provider of services, although there are some examples of effective brokerage in the areas of continuing professional development.

Recommendations**In order to improve management services to schools:**

- present details of the management services to schools in a consistent and co-ordinated format;
- provide details of all services which can be purchased from the council;
- provide information on centrally-resourced services available to the schools;
- offer guidance on service level agreements and standards with external providers;
- ensure that prices for services provided by the council reflect the real cost.

102. **Financial services** were good in the previous inspection. This continues to be the case and is endorsed by the LEA's own self-evaluation, the evidence of the school survey, and the headteachers' focus groups. No further inspection fieldwork was carried out.

103. The high quality of the **human resource services** was noted at the time of the previous inspection. A period of change and staff movement has caused some deterioration in the service. Nevertheless, it is currently satisfactory. The introduction of single status, preparatory work for the joint venture company and internal re-organisation have put pressure on the capacity of the service. However, the majority of responses in the school survey considered the quality of professional personnel advice and casework to be satisfactory.

104. Schools are not charged full costs as these incorporate functions that make up the LEA's statutory role which confuses the responsibilities of the LEA with the schools. Nevertheless, all schools buy the comprehensive package. Headteachers and governors are offered well-regarded training in employers responsibilities. Model policies are in place and updated regularly. Casework is generally well supported, although there were difficulties and mistakes during a period in which less experienced staff were used. Most contract of employment statements are issued within statutory timescales.

105. There have been no industrial tribunals over recent years and the industrial relations climate has been generally positive. However, the recent disruptions to and pressures on the service have caused some concern that professional working arrangements has weakened this constructive relationship with the unions and staff associations.

106. The authority has started to initiate workforce reforms. It now has in place a seconded assistant headteacher as co-ordinator, a dedicated human resources officer and a strategic planning group. A pilot school has been identified and draft plans have been produced.

107. **Property services** are satisfactory. The majority of schools consider the quality of building maintenance services as at least satisfactory. However, the management of building projects is judged poor by secondary schools. The authority recognises this weakness and is attempting to address it through buying in expertise and improving its internal capacity. It is

also sensibly in the process of producing a comprehensive manual of advice for schools on building maintenance.

108. Schools have access to effective technical support from qualified surveyors. Advice is linked to the authority's asset management plan and a medium and long-term draft plan exists for each school. Currently, money is held at the centre for major maintenance work under an exchange package which was agreed with schools to run for three years. This arrangement is programmed to be reviewed in April 2004, when more flexible options will be presented.

109. The quality of **support for ICT administration** is satisfactory, although there have been delays caused by the collapse of an initial contract with an external firm, reorganisation, and difficulties in securing a strategic partner.

110. Reliable electronic communication between schools and the LEA is in place. There are common hardware and software platforms across the LEA. The majority of schools rate this aspect as satisfactory. Model guidelines for schools are provided on internet and e-mail use, but there are no internal protocols for e-communication or formal systems to minimise data requests to schools.

111. The use of ICT for major administrative tasks is good. Solihull was designated a no error authority by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in the implementation of the pupil level annual school census which was also used to improve the quality of pupil data held. The LEA was a pilot authority and participated in the national working party. The common transfer form was also introduced successfully.

112. The LEA's strategy for managing information and data is similarly positively rated by schools and was in the top quartile of performance in the school survey at both primary and secondary level. The LEA has effective systems for storing and handling data on pupils but these do not as yet form a complete common basic data set. Although currently there are still several pupil databases, repeat entry of data is being tackled as is the connectivity of systems in children's services with those in education.

113. ICT developments as a means of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of management rightly form part of the EDP2 priority to improve the education infrastructure. The helpdesk is effective and much appreciated by schools, as is support received from the computer administration training team. Although operational links with curriculum ICT are not yet fully developed, they are in place for pupil attainment data and their use. The council's website gives a range of information for the public on education services and is easy to use.

114. In contrast, primary and secondary schools judged technical support to be poor. This had been recognised by the authority, but its initial contract with an external firm to supply technical support was not a success. Subsequently, internal capacity has been increased and there are early signs of improvement with the centralising of all ICT technical support.

115. **Cleaning and caretaking** were not assessed during the last inspection. The authority performs its client support role well and the service is good. Funds for cleaning and

caretaking have been fully delegated to schools and the majority of schools employ their own direct cleaning and caretaking labour force. As well as individually priced services, three different client support options are offered by the authority: the building cleaning support services, caretaking relief staff and premises security patrols. Some 94% of schools purchase the building cleaning support service which provides, among other things, advice on cleaning, tendering of contracts and maintenance of cleaning equipment.

116. **Grounds maintenance** was not judged during the last inspection. Funds for this service have been fully delegated to schools. No central contract is provided although delegated funding can be used to seek specialist advice from Community Services. The LEA retains no responsibility for monitoring.

117. **Catering services** were not inspected in the previous report. The service is good. LEA statutory responsibilities, including arrangements for free school meals, are performed well. Kitchen repairs and maintenance are given sufficient priority. A comprehensive central contract is available for client support as well as one for direct services. Both of these services are well and enthusiastically managed. Good advice is available on nutritional standards and effective consultation and monitoring processes are in place.

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

118. The LEA has developed a rigorous approach to recruitment and retention and its work in this area is good. It has a comprehensive strategy for the recruitment and retention of a suitably qualified teacher workforce, which is an objective for the LEA within EDP2. The leadership of the strategy by the recruitment strategy manager is good and there is a high level of effective collaboration between the human resources and the inspection and advisory services.

119. In 2001, the vacancy rate rose to above the average for LEAs in the West Midlands but this has improved in the last two years and is now well below that average. The LEA has been effective in analysing its staffing needs and markets itself with clarity and confidence. It has been active in promoting itself with initial teacher training institutions and supports locally-based school-centred initial teacher training provision in several of its high schools. The LEA has secured preferential rates for local housing and established a successful local supply teacher agency.

120. The LEA has also been active in recruiting and supporting newly qualified teachers. This has ensured a steady flow of new teachers into Solihull schools which has been successful in reducing the impact of shortages in teaching staff across the authority. However, significant recruitment difficulties are experienced by some schools, especially those in challenging circumstances, and in some secondary subjects such as design and technology, mathematics and science.

121. The work of the inspection and advisory service provides a good comprehensive approach to the continuing professional development of teachers. This is an important contributor to the LEA's strategy for teacher retention. Despite a slight downturn in participation this year, the overall approach to professional development necessary to make

an impact on teacher retention and teacher quality is robust and well supported by the schools.

Section 3: Special educational needs

Summary

122. Improvements have been made since the previous inspection and the strategy and support for SEN are now highly satisfactory. The new strategy for SEN is widely accepted and sets out an ambitious agenda for the LEA and its schools. Detailed planning for its implementation is in place and is given high priority in the EDP2. The management of the statutory obligations relating to SEN has also improved and is now good. The management of the pupil inclusion and support team is good. Schools have access to a good range of expertise from the support services and the inspection and advisory service. The LEA monitors school performance and targets support and intervention effectively. Mechanisms for distributing SEN funding to schools are not sufficiently linked to recent assessments of needs and monitoring of the use of delegated funds remains inadequate.

Strategy

123. The LEA's strategy for SEN is highly satisfactory. At the time of the previous inspection it was unsatisfactory. There were important gaps in the LEA's knowledge of overall school provision and in its capacity to advise on developments. Management is now effective and the LEA has gained the confidence of schools and parents.

124. Following the last inspection, the LEA worked rigorously to deal with the underlying issues that were raised. There have been a number of highly significant changes in staffing, particularly at senior management level. New staff have been appointed to work within the pupil inclusion and support teams and in the inspection and advisory service. These teams have a strong customer focus and there has been an ongoing programme of well-targeted training for staff. A new post of pupil inclusion and support manager has had a significant impact on improving the co-ordination of SEN services and in creating better understanding and greater confidence among headteachers and with families.

125. The LEA has recently published a good policy on SEN and inclusion which sets out a clear vision. It has also developed a clear strategic plan which shows how the policy will be implemented. The policy for the inclusion of children with SEN and the related strategy have been subject to widespread and effective consultation. The documents present a good analysis of the provision and practice which the LEA needs to address in managing SEN effectively. The strategy recognises the complexity of provision and sets out clearly the expectations that the LEA, schools and other contributors should have of each other. It is ambitious about how placements should be made and tackles the barriers to inclusion emphatically. Its objectives are understood by the headteachers who contributed to discussion groups for this inspection.

126. The broad intentions of the strategy are challenging and closely adhere to the Code of Practice. There is sufficient detail on how the objectives will be achieved. A suitable priority for SEN is included in the EDP2 and this is accompanied by an action plan detailing the work for the current year. The proposed actions focus primarily on work with schools.

127. The strategy has recently been adjusted to take account of the scrutiny and overview committee's report on support for pupils with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties. This is a very comprehensive report which resulted from a good scrutiny process. A clear agenda for further improvement has been established that illustrates the high level of support and understanding of elected members. It has helped to ensure that SEN is a high priority throughout the work of the new directorate. Stakeholders including schools, because of the number of plans which cover this area, find it difficult to identify which plan, report or strategy document drives the current work.

Recommendation

In order to improve the LEA's implementation of its strategy for special educational needs to all relevant stakeholders:

- integrate the the various strands of planning, including the EDP2 and the action plan which resulted from the scrutiny report on pupils with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties into one strategy implementation plan for special educational needs.

Statutory obligations

128. At the time of the previous inspection the way in which the LEA discharged its statutory duties for SEN was highly satisfactory. It is now good. The processing of statements has improved and is now efficient. The percentage of statements which are maintained, is increasing steadily but under control. The percentage of statements completed within 18 weeks has improved markedly to 87% including exceptions, and to 98%, excluding exceptions.

129. A great deal of work has taken place to manage this effectively. The LEA has published criteria which have helped schools to develop appropriate thresholds for SEN. Effective moderation of requests for statutory assessment and for statements takes place in panels which include representatives from schools. The re-invigoration of these panels has been a major contributing factor in improving the assessment process and ensuring that schools are more skilled in providing appropriate supporting evidence of good quality. The SEN assessment unit is very well led and managed. All reviews are reported and acknowledged. However, the LEA does not routinely draw together the extent of pupils' progress from the findings of their annual reviews to provide a clear statement on their progress overall.

130. Very few appeals are made by parents. Parents who were interviewed for this inspection were very complimentary about the way the directorate takes up an advocacy role for their children. The recent survey of parents shows that the service they receive is highly valued. The parent partnership is operating effectively, using a good network of supporters who are well organised and enthusiastic, and is actively supported by the assessment officers.

SEN functions to support school improvement

131. The support provided by the SEN teams for school improvement remains highly satisfactory. Individual services make sound contributions and carry out a range of satisfactory evaluations of their work with schools and its impact. The LEA is knowledgeable of overall school provision and follows up school inspection and self-evaluation outcomes with targeted support which is, in the main, purchased by schools. Evidence from school inspections demonstrates that schools are making satisfactory or better provision for SEN.

132. Headteachers and SEN coordinators have access to a good range of support and training. The work of the literacy, numeracy and Key Stage 3 strategy teams makes a good contribution to supporting schools' focus on the needs of pupils with SEN. They have provided good training and have ensured that teachers in special schools are fully involved in the national improvement strategies.

133. Management systems, including the regular monitoring of performance indicators and the completion of pupils' annual reviews, are good. SEN inspectors collate outcomes from the annual school review process to recognise schools needing additional support or to identify training needs. The SEN team has provided clear feedback to schools on any issues relating to the assessment process that are highlighted at assessment panel meetings. Schools have found this helpful.

134. The various teams which support SEN conduct detailed reviews of their work but there is no systematic audit of the operation of the Code of Practice in schools. Current evaluation focuses on policies and processes and does not include monitoring the attainment of pupils with SEN, monitoring budgets or providing an analysis of the outcomes of pupils' achievements and progress from their annual reviews.

Value for money

135. Value for money was judged to be satisfactory at the last inspection but it is now unsatisfactory. The last inspection recommended close monitoring of the centrally-held funds. This has not been achieved. Officers understand more clearly how funding for SEN should be delegated against transparent criteria and procedures. The thorough analyses carried out by the managers of the service have exposed several weaknesses in the way SEN funding has been managed.

136. Schools and officers have rightly challenged the way in which resources are allocated to schools based on what is termed "a learning difficulty factor". This process has improved recently in consultation with secondary schools and proposals are in place to change the approach with primary schools. Some headteachers and SEN co-ordinators are confused about how this process operates and many challenge its reasonableness in matching the needs of some schools. This was an issue at the previous inspection. In addition the LEA's monitoring of the use of delegated resources and their impact lacks consistency.

137. Budget monitoring is satisfactory but there is insufficient regular mutual challenge between the finance team and the managers of the service. The budget for SEN, when compared with other similar authorities, has historically been lower than average. The LEA, in line with the priority to improve SEN, has increased funding in recent years but the

budget-setting process has not fully taken account of known difficulties. The LEA rightly commissioned an evaluation of the financial issues relating to the support budget for pupils with a statement SEN placed in mainstream schools. This very good evaluation has identified an annual deficit of over £0.25 million.

138. The extent to which funding for SEN is delegated to schools is low. Schools have mixed views about increasing it. They have reservations because the budget for supporting pupils with statements in mainstream schools has been overspent and schools are unclear, therefore, whether the budget for SEN including the overspend will be delegated. However, recently, the LEA has given schools confidence that the funding system is being properly reviewed and monitored. This has the potential for the LEA to be able to distribute funding for school action and school action plus using the transparency of real pupil data, and resolve its deficit on the support assistants' budget.

139. The funding for independent and out-of-borough placements is well managed and is an early example of the benefits of combining the education and social care budgets for these placements. Proposals are being developed to modernise the funding mechanism for special schools so that their more challenging profile is recognised.

Recommendations

In order to improve the deployment of SEN funding to support the priority for inclusion:

- establish a coherent system for setting and distributing the budget for SEN;
- address the issues raised by the financial review of the mainstream support budget for pupils with a statement for SEN;
- introduce regular monitoring and evaluation of schools' expenditure for special needs which challenges them about the provision they make and the rate with which pupils' progress.

Section 4: Promoting social inclusion

Summary

140. Promoting social inclusion has a high priority. Significant changes have been made since the previous inspection which have put the LEA in a good position to promote social inclusion and raise the attainment of disadvantaged children. Many of the most major developments are at an early stage and are still to have an effect. Restructuring of the council's directorates to form a new directorate for education and children's social services already demonstrates the potential advantages of seamless services for children. There are some examples where this structural change has enabled better integration of the work of education and social services. The LEA has been successful in bidding for additional funding and has assembled the resources necessary for schools in the north of the borough to raise attainment. In particular, the development of a network of extended schools is well supported. Services to promote social inclusion have generally improved their overall effectiveness, although within this overall improving picture, there are one or two omissions in monitoring basic requirements.

The strategy to promote social inclusion

141. The LEA's strategy for promoting social inclusion is now highly satisfactory. In the previous inspection, the strategy for social inclusion was unsatisfactory and had significant weaknesses. At that time, two bids for an Education Action Zone were unsuccessful and had left a partial vacuum in LEA policy.

142. The council's plans indicate a strong and appropriate intention to bridge the gap between the north and the south of the borough, often in spite of some concerns of those living and working in the south that they will miss out. The council is working on many fronts although many of the developments are still to be finalised and planned in detail. The resources rely on the successful acquisition of targeted national grant funding for this purpose.

143. There is a clear understanding that promoting social inclusion in the north of the borough requires a concerted effort to improve the community as well as schools. This includes plans to form a regeneration company which has a long-term programme to regenerate the physical environment of area. A local public service agreement has clear and significant priorities which add coherence to existing plans aimed at closing the gap between the north and the south. Bringing education and children's social services together in one directorate has the intention of removing the barriers so that services can be better aligned to meet the needs of children and families at an earliest stage of development. In addition to the development of an integrated department, the children and young people's local strategic partnership is in operation and is well attended. It brings a range of different organisations together to develop better mutual understanding and coordinate the work of the different agencies. The council has been successful in obtaining pathfinder status with the primary care trust for the development of a children's trust.

144. The restructuring leading to a single directorate for all children's services has placed Solihull in advance of developments nationally. The move to one department is very well supported by members, officers and schools. A significant amount of mapping of services and consultation with children and young people has taken place with a view to identifying gaps in local provision. However, the results of the mapping have not been sufficiently disseminated to inform staff about the services which are available. At a strategic level, there is an understanding about how developments such as identification, referral and tracking, the local preventive strategy and the children's trust will all assist integration of services by clearly identifying gaps in provision and enabling a coordinated approach to commissioning services. However, these developments are not as yet advanced and what they hope to achieve, over and above researching current practice and mapping provision, has not been clearly articulated.

Recommendations

In order to improve the strategy for social inclusion:

- bring all the current mapping of needs and services together through the Children's Trust to provide a comprehensive strategic view of the services which are available and to identify the gaps in service provision;
- develop a coordinated approach to commissioning services through the Children's Trust so that the gaps in service provision can be filled;
- complete the work on a service directory which includes the services on offer, their appropriate client group and methods of referral and disseminate this widely to education and social care staff so that they can devise suitable preventive packages of support for children and their families which are appropriate to their needs;
- through the local strategic partnership and the children and young people's strategic partnerships, agree a shared understanding of the definition of children in need and prioritise their access to services;
- in the longer term, devise ways of ensuring that the information about the involvement of agencies in supporting children and their families is coordinated and shared.

145. Progress toward the integration of services at an operational level has been inhibited by serious problems with the recruitment and retention of social workers and the necessity to achieve some stability in that service. There are some examples where talented officers have enabled better integrated working arrangements, most notably with raising the attainment of looked after children, the planning and placement children who are hard to place and some early work developing the potential for extended schools. However, as yet, the systems and procedures which are required for managing integration at an operational level such as protocols between social workers and teachers, clarification and improvements in the routes of referral, identifying appropriate pathways for the provision of support established for children in need and the knowledge of teachers and social workers of mutual priorities and services have not been established.

Recommendation**In order to improve services to children in need:**

- develop joint protocols which govern working arrangements between teachers and social workers and provide joint training to establish a better dialogue and improved mutual understanding of priorities.

146. The council has been very successful in its bids for additional funding, which have included all major national projects aimed at closing the gap. Bids are clear and have been rated highly. These include an Excellence Cluster, a Behaviour Improvement Programme, the Leadership Incentive Grant and the development of a network of extended schools together with the prospect of a new city academy. In particular, the early development of extended schools has been very well supported and managed. In total, this has resulted in a significant package to support schools and to establish a suitable network of preventive services for children and their families. As yet, however, with the exception of Sure Start initiatives and Excellence in Cities initiatives, these developments are at an early stage. Schools in the north, while positive about the much needed injection of new resources, also express concern about the additional demands which the management of grant funded initiatives require combined with the concerns over their sustainability.

147. As yet, establishing new preventive services have not been able to reduce the number of referrals to specialist services or the need for crisis intervention into dysfunctional families. There are few signs that these services are being used in a managed way to give priority to children who have been referred to social services as children in need. Nevertheless, the resources have been assembled which should, when implemented, provide good prospects for improvement.

The provision of school places and admissions

148. The LEA's effectiveness in the provision of school places and arrangements for admissions was good in the previous inspection report. The LEA's own self-evaluation and key performance indicators confirm that these functions remain good. The birthrate in Solihull has dropped significantly especially in the north and the authority is rightly planning ahead for the effects of this on school places. A scrutiny and overview committee task and finish review group is considering school place planning and admissions. No detailed fieldwork was carried out during this inspection.

Asset management

149. This function was not inspected in the previous inspection. The current effectiveness of Solihull in discharging asset management planning is good. The asset management plan (AMP) sets out the LEA's priorities and strategic links are made with school improvement. The AMP was graded by the DfES as three star, with elements of good practice for both the statement of priorities and the local policy statement. This is a significant improvement on previous submissions and the authority has been invited to provide material for the DfES's best practice web-site.

150. Developing high quality building stock rightly forms part of an EDP2 priority to improve the education infrastructure. Solihull has invested over many years in its building stock. There are no immediate concerns over the backlog of work nor over the condition of its buildings. The authority is involved in partnering arrangements and has submitted a Building Schools of the Future bid which covers some schools in the north of the borough where the life span of their buildings is coming to a close.

151. Priorities for school investment have been agreed with schools and the school survey shows that the majority of schools are satisfied with the LEA asset management planning processes. The AMP consultative group of headteachers now forms part of the School Forum. The LEA is rightly planning to revisit data and priorities. Condition and suitability data are updated annually and there is a pilot for making these available on line and interactive for all schools.

152. The asset management team is small and thus its capacity for further developments is restricted. Although the service is school-focused, there is no formal process for monitoring how schools spend their devolved capital funding. This inhibits the LEA's ability to be proactive in helping schools.

Provision of education for pupils who have no school place

153. Provision for pupils who have no school place is satisfactory. The LEA's strategy and provision continue to ensure prompt arrangements for suitable and good quality education for the vast majority of pupils requiring education otherwise than at school. However, in doing so, the education unit for vulnerable and looked after children and young people, although achieving good outcomes, is unregistered with the DfES.

Recommendation

In order to meet statutory responsibilities:

- register the education unit which provides education for pupils out of school.

154. Good preventive work in schools has successfully restricted the number of permanent exclusions. Referral systems are effective, and well maintained. Carefully monitored databases of children out of school are regularly updated by officers, schools and practitioners working with them, including social workers and the police. Pupils transferring between phases and to other authorities are similarly well tracked.

155. Continuing the education of pupils excluded from schools is a priority for the LEA. Two pupil referral units successfully provide temporary full-time provision within two weeks of exclusion. Pupils excluded for a fixed-term period of over 15 school days also receive provision from the pupil referral units, recharged to schools. Discrete carefully managed full-time provision at Key Stage 4 very successfully supports highly disruptive pupils, identified in Year 9 who are risk of permanent exclusion, to gain GCSE.

156. The progress of all pupils is carefully tracked and thoroughly monitored. Effective links with schools and with other services and agencies, including health and social services, help to maintain high levels of attendance, promote achievement and support high rates of

reintegration into mainstream and alternative provision, ably assisted by two placement panels. Significantly, in the secondary referral unit, in 2002-03, 66 attenders out of 77 gained a range of external accreditation from undertaking short courses.

157. Education provision for looked after children who are unaccompanied minors who are asylum seekers is not satisfactory because school placements are not found in a timely way. There has been insufficient challenge to local schools who are sometimes unwilling to admit the young people because they do not speak English. The support provided to support children with English as an additional language is of good quality but its small size constrains the extent to which it can take on new priorities. The authority has already made additional provision for unaccompanied asylum seekers and is planning to establish a new support team to assist the settlement of asylum seekers. However, the Home Office has written to the local authority informing it of the uncertainties about the arrangements for the reimbursement of costs associated with the support as a result of the Hillingdon judgement which still have to be resolved.

Recommendation

In order to improve the timeliness of placement of unaccompanied minors who are seeking asylum in educational provision:

- work with the schools to raise awareness of the implications of new admission requirements for looked after children, including unaccompanied minors, and help to devise with schools ways in which the young people's needs can be met.

158. The education of home-educated children is subject to effective annual monitoring from the inspection and advisory service. The home teaching service provides well for the temporary educational needs of pupils unable to attend school because of medical reasons or pregnancy. Arrangements rightly emphasise continuing links with host schools.

Attendance

159. The LEA provides good support for school attendance. This was the case in the previous inspection. The strategy continues to be effective. It is implemented in an intelligent way through wide-ranging and concerted action from a highly competent team. The reduction of unauthorised absence is one of seven key aims in Solihull's community strategy, and attendance targets are fundamental to the authority's inclusion and achievement agendas.

160. As the lead agency for promoting school attendance, the education welfare service has conducted a major overhaul of policies and practice. Action is now well focused on improving the unsatisfactory attendance of individual pupils as well as tackling specific causes of non-attendance, for example, bullying and harassment. Prosecution processes have been reviewed and full use is made of the court system where appropriate. Attendance figures are above average nationally for primary and secondary schools.

161. Schools have been given impressive guidance on managing attendance and are clear about their and the LEA's respective roles and responsibilities. Annual 'health checks' make good use of comprehensive data, offer robust challenge and good guidance on setting targets for attendance, and provide an effective audit of need for the deployment of resources.

Service standards underpin agreements with schools and ensure that the very comprehensive range of strategies for supporting attendance are effectively targeted. All schools receive strategic support and casework on attendance and welfare matters in proportion to need, and officers work with clusters of primary and secondary schools to promote good practice.

162. Liaison and co-ordination across services and with other agencies, including the police, in following up pupils identified by truancy patrols as out of school without reason, are highly effective. The introduction of electronic case recording is resulting in improved sharing of information with social workers.

Behaviour support

163. Support for behaviour is highly satisfactory. In the previous inspection, support for behaviour was limited and arrangements for excluded pupils were not always effective. A recommendation to extend the behaviour support plan as a costed action plan, indicating how various agencies were co-ordinated, has been addressed.

164. This plan is now well subsumed within the EDP2, setting continuing action firmly within priorities to address social inclusion, and concentrating both on targeted pupils and targeted schools. This has been a sensible decision, promoting cross-service and multi-agency working and broadening the scope of action in line with the council's objectives for inclusion. However, although the LEA's vision for 'zero exclusion' is to be commended, an absence of staged targets reduces the LEA's capacity to evaluate the success of its support.

165. The range of provision has expanded markedly. Good multi-agency and cross-service working with health, social services and the police is a strong feature of planning and practice. A secondary pupil referral unit now works very successfully on preventive programmes for pupils at risk of exclusion; seven schools have learning support units; additional posts have been created; and highly relevant multi-professional training, advice and publications are available to schools. Other well-targeted initiatives have included visits from education welfare officers to pupils excluded for more than five days for bullying, work-related and mentoring projects for primary and secondary aged pupils at risk of disaffection, joint casework with social services for looked after children, and a secondary focus group providing good support for lead teachers in schools. Behavioural issues, as well as schools' attendance and exclusion targets, are part of the annual review of schools. Where behaviour management is a key issue in schools of concern, support is available for reviewing systems and structures.

166. The rate of permanent exclusion from schools is now broadly in line with national figures, with overall numbers falling from 46 in 2001-2002 to 31 in 2002-2003. However, more worrying is the increase in fixed-term exclusions this year, which undoubtedly can be partly attributed to improved recording. There is a substantial range in the number of temporary exclusions from individual schools, between 33 and 233. However, so far the data have not been analysed to account for these differences.

Recommendation**In order to reduce the rising numbers of fixed-term exclusion:**

- analyse the data which are now available and target support where the rate of fixed-term exclusion is too high

167. A review of services to pupils with emotional and social behavioural difficulties, led by the overview and scrutiny board, is driving a fundamental review of all provision for behaviour. Strategic plans outline a coherent framework for action for pupils with emotional and social behavioural difficulties. This rightly gives priority to multi-agency working, joint commissioning arrangements, and co-ordinated management information systems across education, social care and health. A detailed and costed implementation plan is under way.

Health, safety, welfare and child protection

168. This is satisfactory overall but there is a significant weakness in the discharge of the LEA's responsibilities for child protection. At the time of the previous inspection it was good.

169. The LEA contributes to the work of the area child protection committee (ACPC). A nominated senior officer attends the ACPC and its sub-committees. No review of a serious case has been necessary for a child of school age because of a failure in the child protection arrangements. Recently, the ACPC updated procedures and these were circulated to schools in an appropriate way which drew the attention of schools to their importance. The ACPC requires that all staff with child protection responsibilities undertake the multidisciplinary two day core training course. However, because of the number of staff, this is unrealistic for education services and is currently under review.

170. A training team has been formed within education to provide training for the education service. A good range of suitable courses is provided, including a distance learning pack and support networks. Training is easily available. However, the training provision has not been systematically organised so that teachers can progress by attending courses at increasing level of difficulty and specialisation. The training which is undertaken by school staff is thoroughly monitored but the percentage of designated teachers who have been trained within the last two years is too low. This is a significant weakness. Some schools have not undertaken training for a significant number of years. Steps have been taken through the Solihull schools forum to raise the awareness of schools to the importance of training.

Recommendation**In order to improve the LEA's support to protecting and safeguarding children:**

- ensure that all designated teachers regularly attend appropriate training.

171. Schools raised a few examples during the inspection where they were dissatisfied with the way in which referrals to children's social services are tackled, either because of the

lack of information which they receive following the referral or when the referral has not been accepted because it does not meet the necessary criteria. The social services inspectorate found that the threshold for referral for child protection was very high. Information on the action which has been taken is not always passed to schools in a timely enough way.

Recommendations

In order to improve the LEA's support for protecting and safeguarding children :

- establish a system for collating schools' concerns about the action which has been taken in order that the number of cases can be monitored and the circumstances scrutinised;
- through ACPC, improve the understanding of schools of referral and assessment procedures in order to promote an effective inter-agency response to determining need and risk, and to ensure that children who do not enter the child protection system but have particular needs receive appropriate support.

172. The education and children's services directorate is updating its health and safety policy. It contains clear statements on governors and staff responsibilities and succinctly and clearly covers risks assessments and a full range of advice on health and safety arrangements on particular requirements and events. Appropriate guidance is provided to schools on new requirements. Steps to achieve compliance with the requirements of one improvement notice issued by HM Inspectors of Health and Safety have been taken. The LEA has made arrangements for monitoring school health and safety management policies and procedures.

Looked after children

173. Support for raising the educational standards of children and young people who are looked after by the local authority is good overall, some aspects are barely satisfactory while other aspects are excellent. At the previous inspection, support was good overall and there was effective joint working with the social services department. These included developing policy and procedures for monitoring the education and performance of looked after children and young people.

174. Elected members are aware of their responsibilities for corporate parenting. They have had opportunities to attend seminars for several years but have only recently initiated work which will systematically enable them to fulfil their responsibilities. Not all members of the scrutiny and overview committee are clear about the recent arrangements to strengthen their involvement. In this respect, developments have fallen behind the current practice of many LEAs. The cabinet member for education and children's services has established an advisory group of members to ensure that duties are fulfilled. The cabinet member has met with children who are looked after, but there is no systematic and regular mechanism whereby members can hear at first hand about the children and young people's experiences and concerns.

175. There are effective mechanisms in place to coordinate the work of education services to support looked after children. A target to improve attainment has been included in

the local public service agreement. This has been developed in such a way as to portray clearly the progress of the small numbers of looked after children, using measures of improvement against their previous performance. The effectiveness of the support is regularly reviewed and appropriate action is taken as a result of the findings. Planning for improvement is good.

176. While educational standards are still low when compared with national and local averages, they have improved. The value added measures show, for the most part, progress in line with or above the national and local averages. Individual children and young people continue to take advantage of their educational opportunities and great efforts are made to provide opportunities which meet needs. A small group of young people who are approaching the age at which they will leave care contributed to this inspection. While all but one of them had at one time or another faced some disruption in their education, they were all in touch with some form of education and training and all had Connexions personal advisers. One or two of the young people are repeating a school year so that they can gain their qualifications.

177. The support which is provided by the staff at an education unit to raise the standards of attainment of looked after children is excellent and exemplifies good practice nationally. The progress and attainment of looked after children are very carefully monitored every term. A brief questionnaire which provides triggers of early concerns is circulated to schools for completion on a termly basis. The response rate is over 90% and the returns are used to direct support before the problems become acute. In addition, attainment in National Curriculum assessments and GCSE examinations is carefully monitored, using overall performance and rates of progress. This helps to identify young people who require more support. It has also helped the unit manager to build up a detailed understanding of the children and their needs.

178. Personal education plans have been completed for all looked after children. Joint training has been provided for social workers, teachers and foster carers to ensure that the personal education plan is understood. Care and education reviews are timed so that they are compatible. Personal education plans have been reviewed and evaluated by an LEA inspector to identify how they can be improved. All placements of looked after children which are made outside the borough have been monitored and evaluated to ensure suitability.

Measures to combat racism

179. Support for combating racism is satisfactory. Since the previous inspection, the council has ensured a higher profile for combating racism, but realises further action is needed, which is already under way.

180. A strengthened cross-directorate race equality group, which includes membership from unions and a black workers' group, is successful as a forum for consultation with minority communities. It has a clear remit and plan for providing strategic leadership across the council. A recently-appointed corporate officer for equality is very clear about what needs to be done and how. This includes auditing service plans against council priorities, informing performance management, working with the police, and improving reporting to members. The brief of a second officer will include ensuring fair access to services.

181. Following the council's position statement and action plan which implemented the recommendations from the report of the committee of inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence, suitable training was provided for officers; translation services were reviewed; and very helpful guidance was issued to schools comprising model policies and action plans, alongside a framework for self-evaluation. A multi-cultural education circular continues to offer good advice, and a range of projects, initiatives and guidance is successfully promoting the traditions of cultural and faith groups. In 2003, a draft race equality scheme provided the backdrop for a high profile and successful conference attended by three-quarters of schools. This highlighted a need for further guidance on combating racism.

182. Substantial progress has been made on improving data systems, including workforce data and the monitoring of racist incidents. This shows an increase in the number of applications from newly qualified teachers representing minority ethnic groups, but recent figures for the overall teaching force have not yet been analysed. Monitoring of and action from reported incidents of racism are taken very seriously, with members requiring regular returns. Schools are growing more confident in recognising such incidents and reporting is highlighting areas for further action, particularly in dealing with covert racism.

Recommendation

In order to improve action to combat racism:

- analyse data now available to devise equality targets, and identify action necessary to ensure the education workforce at all levels is representative of the local community.

Section 5: Corporate issues

Summary

183. The council is committed to improving public services and has embarked on an ambitious transformation programme designed to improve services for residents. It has reviewed every aspect of its organisation including its vision and values, plans, arrangements for performance management and the structures which are required to deliver the services. Some of these changes are understood and are regarded positively by schools, for instance the integration of education and children's social services and the clear statement of objectives, which accord a high priority to ensuring a brighter future for children. Other changes have not always been well understood by schools, which are uncertain about how far the changes are relevant to them. Coincidentally, the transformation programme has been implemented at a time when there have been a number of changes in staff at every level in a council. The plans to increase the council's capacity by securing a strategic partner have not come to fruition. Nevertheless, the council has been successful in the development of effective partnership arrangements with a range of different organisations.

Corporate planning

184. Corporate planning is highly satisfactory and its implementation is satisfactory. Corporate planning was satisfactory and its implementation good at the time of the previous inspection. The LEA had a clear and corporate strategic approach to planning. It had made sound progress towards its stated goal of becoming a high-trust LEA founded on an effective partnership with its schools.

185. Since that inspection, planning has kept pace with requirements nationally. The local strategic partnership has been formed with some 140 affiliated organisations. It has published its vision and, very recently, the community strategy which includes appropriate priority for children and young people. As yet, it is hard to detect the success over and above engaging different partners. However, there is an intention to produce more detailed plans for each priority which is included in the community strategy.

186. The council has responded to the finding of the Audit Commission's corporate assessment report and has published clear strategic priorities in the council plan. The council plan is clear and accessible. A particular strength is the way in which it develops coherence with other planning requirements and, in particular, the local public service agreement. It builds on a vision and values which have been developed as a result of wide consultation. Five appropriate council objectives have been set which include a high priority for children and young people in the priority "A Brighter Future for our Children."

187. The council's plan sets an ambitious programme of eight "step-change programmes". Three are particularly pertinent to the education service and include raising educational achievement, maintaining a two star rating for children's services and finding regeneration strategies for the borough, especially for north Solihull. The plan also suitably links the objectives to arrangements for the delivery, including setting targets, establishing

partnerships and in particular developing strategic partnering and performance management arrangements.

188. A potentially good system for planning at all levels is being developed, although as yet it is not fully in operation. Its greatest strength is the coherence which is achieved between plans. The council's strategic objectives are developed in a consistent way throughout the all plans and, in future, will be reflected into the performance objectives of staff. At the present time, the link has been made between corporate objectives and directorate and divisional plans. However, while the proposed actions are very clear and outcomes reasonably so, the estimate and allocation of resources which are required to fulfil intentions are not. This is a weakness particularly for an authority where staffing is generally sufficient to manage the day-to-day requirements but stretched when required to manage change, or a large project or to cover staffing vacancies.

189. The implementation of the council plan, together with directorate and divisional plans, is at an early stage. Implementation is monitored through the regular scrutiny of 40 headline indicators, with appropriate procedures for acting where indicators show under-performance. This cycle of monitoring performance is at an early stage.

190. The council has embarked on a significant change programme which has reviewed every aspect of its structure and working arrangements. It has undertaken negotiations with a strategic partner which have taken up the council's time and capacity. In predicting the likelihood of finalising the strategic partnership, posts were left vacant in anticipation of the new arrangements. Negotiations were ended by mutual consent at a very late stage leaving a gap between the ambitious priorities and the way in which they can be achieved.

Recommendation

In order to improve the implementation of corporate plans:

- take steps to consolidate the existing changes which have been made in the transformation programme so that they are embedded in the management systems of the council

Decision-making

191. Decision-making is satisfactory. At the time of the previous inspection it was good, with consultation with schools being an area of emerging strength.

192. A strength at the corporate and strategic level is that decision-making is energetic, confident, radical and based on a real intention to seek new approaches to improve local services. However, there are weaknesses in the way in which some decisions are implemented which hamper consequent improvement for instance, planning does not always include an accurate assessment of the resources required for implementation. Contingency arrangements and risk assessment also need to be strengthened.

193. The work of the overview and scrutiny committee for education and children's services in calling-in and scrutinising decision-making has been very limited. Nevertheless,

it has conducted valuable work in preparing for difficult decisions or distilling future policy. This includes thorough reviews of provision for children with emotional, social and behaviour difficulties, school places and 14 -19 provision.

194. The necessary decisions about the education service have been taken in a timely way. Schools have generally felt well consulted on initiatives within the education service. The major decision to restructure the directorate to include all education and children's social services is viewed as sensible and likely to bring improvements for children.

195. The consultation about the formation of the education forum has been thorough, with several models proposed. Solihull schools forum representatives are very positive about the developments to date and, in particular, the opportunity which has been provided to examine the education budget and its distribution and the schools funding formula. The corporate director's intention to make the education forum the major consultative body and to widen its powers beyond the statutory remit supports the intention to develop the current relationships with schools, which are never less than satisfactory and often good, even further into a more mature partnership.

The leadership provided by officers and elected members

196. The leadership of elected members remains highly satisfactory as it was at the time of the previous inspection. Members provide prudent stewardship of the education service. They are proud of the achievements of the service and supportive to and knowledgeable about schools. They receive sound advice from senior officers.

197. All senior officers have been appointed since the time of the previous inspection and form a relatively newly-appointed team. The leadership overall is highly satisfactory despite sparing capacity at senior management of the education and children's services directorate when compared with the extent of changes which are planned together with the range of different functions for which the directorate is accountable. Although arrangements have been made to cover the vacancies and absences with suitably qualified staff, capacity has been reduced by a long-standing vacancy which proved difficult to fill and during a period when another member of the senior management team suffered a long-term absence.

198. Nevertheless, senior officers have embarked on a challenging agenda for improvement. They have been receptive to the findings and recommendations of inspection. They have been energetic in taking on board new ideas and successful in attracting new opportunities including funding. The chief executive has led the development of the ambitious change programme which, while this has not come to fruition in its entirety, has brought strengths in the clarity of objectives and potential improvements in management arrangements, including performance management.

199. The corporate director of education and children's services has been in post for one year during which time he has presided on a major restructuring of council directorates. This has led to a significant enhancement in his responsibilities at a time when only one member of the senior management team occupied a substantive post. He has made an accurate assessment of the performance of the directorate and has taken sensible actions during the directorate restructuring to stabilise the staffing situation in children's social services. One

head of division has made a significant contribution in obtaining funding for and managing large and often complex projects. Another head of division has been in post only a matter of weeks. In the restructuring of directorates, the third head of division took on new responsibilities within the education service for which suitable induction arrangements have not been undertaken because of the pressing needs in the children's social services.

Recommendation

In order to improve the leadership of the education and children's services directorate:

- assess the capacity of the senior management team against the range of functions for which the education and children's services directorate hold responsibility and take action to enhance the capacity of the directorate to reflect the complexity and number of different functions.

Partnership

200. The number and productivity of the partnerships with other organisations and local services were good at the time of the previous inspection and remains so. The local strategic partnership and the children's and young people's strategic partnership have been convened. Partnership with the primary care trust and the police is good and has resulted in a good number of mutually beneficial developments which have been discussed throughout this report.

201. Relationships with the diocese are good and support is provided when it is requested, although there is no regular programme of meetings with senior managers to discuss the emerging issues.

202. The LEA provides good support for early years education. The Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership was in its infancy at the time of the previous inspection, when since then progress has been rapid. Clear protocols about accountabilities and responsibilities underpin strong partnership working. Good links have been formed with providers and with local, regional and national groups. This has ensured well-considered and co-ordinated developments.

203. All providers have access to good guidance, support and multi-agency training, including network meetings to share good practice. Settings are carefully monitored and reviewed, with improvements clearly identified and well supported. Over one third of settings have now either achieved or are working towards an approved quality assurance scheme – an increase from 4% in 2001.

204. Support for 14-19 education is satisfactory. The LEA has established a good partnership with the Birmingham and Solihull Learning and Skills Council (LSC). An Ofsted area wide 16-19 inspection took place in 2001. The subsequent post inspection action plan, published by the LSC, provides the structure for the councils' 14-19 strategy. The LEA does not have its own strategy group for 14-19 education to drive the policy for developments in the borough.

205. The plan addresses the key issues and provides a clear set of proposals for moving the 14-19 agenda forward. The establishment of the 14-19 policy forum is an innovative approach to ensuring that all stakeholders have a place where their views are listened to and these help to shape the future structure of 14-19 education in the area. Besides the LSC, there are highly satisfactory partnerships with other key players such as secondary schools, local colleges, universities, the Connexions service and local industry, all of whom have key roles in successfully transforming 14-19 education.

206. Solihull has worked hard to develop its strategy in the north of the borough and several strategic decisions have been made concerning the structure to support a radically improved 14-19 provision. The LEA has also secured funding through the LSC to enhance its advisory capacity in support of these developments. Widening post-16 participation and improving staying-on rates are major priorities and are embedded in key strategic plans and targets including the EDP2. There is emerging evidence that actions being taken are beginning to make an impact.

Appendix 1: Recommendations

The following recommendations should be acted upon as a matter of urgency:

In order to improve the deployment of SEN funding to support the priority for inclusion:

- establish a coherent system for setting and distributing the budget for SEN;
- address the issues raised by the financial review of the mainstream support budget for pupils with a statement for SEN;
- introduce regular monitoring and evaluation of schools' expenditure for special needs which challenges them about the provision they make and the rate with which pupils' progress.

In order to meet statutory responsibilities:

- register the education unit which provides education for pupils out of school;

In order to improve the LEA's support to protecting and safeguarding children:

- ensure that all designated teachers regularly attend appropriate training.

However, the following recommendations are also fundamental in that they affect the LEA's overall capacity for improvement:

In order to improve the implementation of corporate plans:

- take steps to consolidate the existing changes which have been made in the transformation programme so that they are embedded in the management systems of the council.

In order to improve the leadership of the education and children's services directorate:

- assess the capacity of the senior management team against the range of functions for which the education and children's services directorate hold responsibility and take action to enhance capacity of the directorate to reflect the complexity and number of different functions.

In order to improve the strategy for social inclusion:

- bring all the current mapping of needs and services together through the Children's Trust to provide a comprehensive strategic view of the services which are available and to identify the gaps in service provision;
- develop a coordinated approach to commissioning services through the Children's Trust so that gaps in provision can be filled;

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- complete the work on a service directory which includes the services on offer, their appropriate client group and methods of referral and disseminate this widely to education and social care staff so that they can devise suitable preventive packages of support for children and their families which are appropriate to their needs;
 - through the local strategic partnership and the children and young people's strategic partnerships agree a shared understanding of the definition of children in need and prioritise their access to services;
 - in the longer term devise ways of ensuring that the information about the involvement of agencies in supporting children and their families is coordinated and shared.

In order to improve services to children in need:

- develop joint protocols which govern working arrangements between teachers and social workers and provide joint training to establish a better dialogue and improved mutual understanding of priorities.

In order to improve the timeliness of placement of unaccompanied minors who are seeking asylum in educational provision:

- work with the schools, to raise awareness of the implications of new admission requirements for looked after children including unaccompanied minors, and help to devise with schools ways in which the young people's needs can be met.

We also make the following recommendations:

In order to target all support to areas of greatest need:

- modernise the role of liaison officers so that their attendance at meetings of governing bodies is proportionate to the needs of the schools.

In order to improve support to pupils from minority groups:

- devise and implement a strategies and initiatives to raise the standards of attainment and behaviour of underachieving Black and Mixed ethnic backgrounds.

In order to improve the support provided for schools for their gifted and talented pupils the LEA should:

- build on all the elements of good practice in the borough and establish a policy and strategy which will ensure that all schools develop in line with the Solihull guidelines;
- monitor the implementation of the policy and guidelines and track the progress being made by pupils designated as gifted and talented in each school.

In order to improve management services to schools:

- present details of the management services to schools in a consistent and co-ordinated format;
- provide details of all services which can be purchased from the council;
- provide information on centrally resourced services available to the schools;
- offer guidance on service level agreements and standards with external providers;
- ensure that prices for services provided by the council reflect the real cost.

In order to improve the LEA's communication of its strategy for special educational needs to all relevant stakeholders:

- integrate the the various strands of planning, including the EDP2 and the action plan which resulted from the scrutiny report on pupils with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties into one strategy implementation plan for special educational needs.

In order to address the rising numbers of fixed-term exclusion:

- analyse the data which is now available and target support where the rate of fixed-term exclusion is too high.

In order to improve the LEA's support for protecting and safeguarding children :

- establish a system for collating schools' concerns about the action which has been taken in order that the number of cases can be monitored and the te circumstances scrutinised;
- through ACPC, improve the understanding of schools of referral and assessment procedures in order to promote an effective inter-agency response to determining need and risk, and to ensure that children who do not enter the child protection system but have particular needs receive appropriate support.

In order to improve action to combat racism:

- analyse data now available to devise equality targets, and identify action necessary to ensure the education workforce at all levels is representative of the local community.

Appendix 2: Record of Judgement Recording Statements for the inspection

Name of LEA :	Solihull
LEA number:	334
Name of Inspector:	Angela Mukhopadhyay
Date of Inspection:	November 2003

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

14	Support to schools for raising standards in and the curriculum use of information and communications technology	4	
15	Support to schools for raising standards at Key Stage 3	2	
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	3	
17	Support to schools for gifted and talented pupils	4	
18	Support for school leadership and management including support for schools effort to achieve Best Value	3	
19	Support to school governors	2	
20	The effectiveness of its services to support school management	4	
20a	Financial services	2	
20b	Human resources	4	
20c	Property services	4	
20d	Services for ICT in school administration	4	
20e	Cleaning and caretaking	2	
20f	Grounds maintenance		
20g	Catering	2	
21	The extent to which the LEA is successful in assuring the supply and quality of teachers	2	
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	2	
24	The effectiveness of strategic planning of services to support school improvement	2	
25	The effectiveness of the performance management of services to support school improvement	2	
26	The standard of expertise of staff to support school improvement	2	
27	The effectiveness of services to school improvement	2	
28	Value for money of services to support school improvement	2	

SECTION 3 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS			
29	The effectiveness of the LEA's strategy for SEN	3	
30	The effectiveness of the LEA in taking steps to meet its statutory obligations in respect of SEN	2	
31	The effectiveness of the LEA in exercising its SEN functions to support school improvement	3	
32	The extent to which the LEA has exercised its SEN functions to meet the requirements of value for money	5	
SECTION 4 PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION			
33	The overall effectiveness of the LEA in promoting social inclusion	3	
34	The effectiveness of the LEA in relation to the provision of school places	2	
35	The effectiveness of the LEA in discharging asset management planning	2	
36	The effectiveness of the LEA in relation to admissions to schools	2	
37	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to provision for pupils who have no school place	4	
38	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to school attendance	2	
39	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to behaviour at school	3	
40	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to health and safety, welfare and child protection	4	
41	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to children in public care	2	
42	The effectiveness of the LEA in combating racism	4	
SECTION 5 CORPORATE ISSUES			
43	The clarity, consistency, coherence and feasibility of corporate plans	3	
44	The effectiveness of the procedures for implementing and evaluating corporate plans	4	
45	The speed, transparency and effectiveness of decision-making (particularly financial decision-making)	3	

46	The quality of leadership provided by elected members	3	
47	The quality of the leadership provided by senior officers	3	
48	The quality of advice given to elected members	3	
49	The effectiveness of the co-ordination of actions in support of priorities involving collaboration between several agencies	2	
OVERALL JUDGEMENTS			
50	The progress made by the LEA overall	3	
51	The LEA's capacity for further improvement and to address the recommendations of the inspection	4	
52	The overall effectiveness of the LEA	3	