



OFFICE FOR STANDARDS
IN EDUCATION

**INSPECTION OF
SANDWELL
LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

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in conjunction with the
AUDIT COMMISSION**

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BACKGROUND

1. This report details the findings of a short inspection conducted under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997 in January 2000. The purpose of the inspection, which was carried out at the request of the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, was to evaluate the progress made in responding to the findings and recommendations of the inspection which took place in January 1998.

2. This second inspection has followed up the progress in implementing the Post-Inspection Action Plan (PIAP) and, in less detail, the Education Development Plan (EDP).

3. The inspection was conducted by a small team of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) in conjunction with the Audit Commission. Documentation provided by the Local Education Authority (LEA), including plans, committee reports and performance data, was scrutinised. Interviews were conducted with elected Members, the Chief Executive, the Director of Education and Community Services, senior officers, and representatives of headteachers and teachers associations and consultation groups. A questionnaire was sent to all of the LEA's schools. The response rate was 86 per cent. The inspection team also examined recent HMI reports on the progress of schools in relation to the National Literacy and National Numeracy Strategies.

COMMENTARY

4. The first inspection of Sandwell LEA in January 1998 identified many weaknesses and made many recommendations but the report expressed some optimism that the LEA had “turned a corner”. It is clear from this inspection that, although there is evidence of improvement in some areas of the LEA’s support to schools, progress has often been slow and insufficient, and is unsatisfactory overall. Disturbingly, in some important respects, the LEA has regressed. This report identifies fundamental problems which have emerged since the time of the last inspection and which constitute major barriers to the rapid progress which is essential in this LEA. Under the present circumstances there is very little possibility that the LEA can sustain the pressing improvements needed to enable all its schools and the pupils they serve to reach their full potential.

5. Sandwell continues to serve a relatively disadvantaged population in terms of the number of low income households and high rates of unemployment. The proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals and those with a statement of special educational needs is in line with national averages, and the proportion of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds is above the national average. Standards in English, mathematics and science in primary schools are improving, in some cases faster than similar LEAs, but overall attainments remain below or well below national averages throughout primary and secondary education. Attendance is well below average in both primary and secondary schools, and authorised absence remains well above average. Permanent exclusions in primary schools are in line with national figures, but they continue to be well above average in secondary schools.

6. Clearly the scale of the task faced by the LEA was and remains very substantial. In its efforts to address these issues the LEA has been assisted to date by a large reservoir of goodwill in its schools, and by the commitment of individual officers to bring about much needed improvements. The LEA has been serious in its efforts to engage with aspects of the central government agenda to improve the quality of education, for example by supporting the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies. In these, and several of the other priorities in the EDP where there has been well focused activity, the LEA has had some encouraging successes. The LEA continues to put a great deal of effort into supporting its schools by accessing additional external funding to help address the very real specific needs of pupils in the area. This includes successful Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funded projects and the more recent Education Action Zone.

7. Overall, however, Sandwell’s best efforts have not been good enough. Satisfactory or better progress has been made in relation to only 12 of the 30 recommendations in the 1998 report. Most progress has been made where there are related priorities in the EDP. These include:

- improving standards of literacy and numeracy;
- improving levels of attendance;
- reducing social exclusion.

8. Insufficient progress has been made in relation to important aspects touching on the management of the LEA and the exercise of basic functions such as:

- securing greater consistency in the quality of service delivery;
- strengthening the co-ordination of school improvement work at the directorate level;
- evaluation of curriculum services;
- the operation of the curriculum access project;
- support for secondary school managers;
- providing full specifications for enhanced learning provision;
- ensuring better understanding of funding arrangements for special educational needs (SEN);
- reduction of surplus places in secondary schools.

9. Furthermore, the LEA has failed to maintain the crucial trust and partnership with all its schools and many have now lost confidence in the senior management of the LEA. The principal reasons for schools' lack of confidence are:

- the LEA's vision and strategic direction have not been clear to all of its schools and communication is poor. Significantly, consultation with schools about the LEA action plan in response to the 1998 OFSTED report was very poor and there has been little formal feedback on progress against the plan;
- very real and justified anxiety in nearly all schools about the pressure on school budgets and the impact of this on standards. Paragraphs 118 to 125 of this report give rise to serious concerns about the management of the education budget;
- widespread frustration and confusion about some aspects of the LEA's special education needs policy, particularly in relation to the lack of a clear policy about the Enhanced Learning Provision (ELP);
- disappointment that the LEA does not know and understand all its schools sufficiently well. This is reflected in the schools' responses to the Audit Commission survey;
- anger about the prospect of reduced support for pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds, and the process which has led to schools now having to consider making staff redundant;
- regret that the LEA did not recognise the seriousness of the weaknesses identified in the last report.

10. As a consequence the agenda facing Sandwell LEA has not diminished. On the contrary, it has increased. The limited progress against the action plan has been too piecemeal and the LEA now has the additional tasks of addressing weaknesses in its partnership with its schools, poor communication on a range of issues, unclear strategic leadership, and serious budget difficulties. This is, then, an LEA with significant and wide ranging weaknesses, some of which constitute serious

impediments to future progress. Overall, the weaknesses in Sandwell LEA are such that the inspection team does not believe the LEA can resolve them unassisted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

11. The following recommendations arise from the limited progress on those contained in the 1998 report.

A: In order to provide schools with access to services with the highest quality of service delivery, based on knowledge of school needs, the following actions need to be taken:

- (i) for all LEA provided services, implement an approach to management based on performance targets for each service, related targets for individual staff, and a commitment to the principles and practices of Best Value across all services;
- (ii) ensure that schools are able to make informed choices in purchasing for the full range of services by improving delegation and purchasing arrangements. Advice about a variety of providers should be made available to enable schools to act as effective purchasers;
- (iii) establish systems to ensure that the LEA's senior management team, and link advisers in particular, make regular and systematic use of the full range of evidence of each school's performance available from all LEA services.

(B) In order to improve the support available to schools to improve standards and the quality of education, the following actions need to be taken:

- (i) improve the Directorate's oversight of the contributions of all LEA provided services in relation to school improvement and co-ordinate support to maximise progress in areas of greatest need;
- (ii) urgently establish rigorous procedures to evaluate and report on the effectiveness of advisers and other school support services in addressing the priorities and meeting the targets established in the EDP;
- (iii) work with schools to identify and employ new strategies to raise the expectations they have of their pupils;
- (iv) establish, in consultation with schools, a register of alternative providers for advice and consultation on teaching and curriculum and management issues;
- (v) vigorously challenge and support secondary schools with poor mathematics results to raise attainment in this subject;

(vi) develop in consultation with schools a viable long term strategy to address the needs of bilingual learners.

C: In order to further improve support for management and efficiency in schools the following actions need to be taken:

In consultation with primary schools:

- (i) produce clearer, and more comprehensive, guidance on agreed principles and procedures for collecting and using performance data to identify and set challenging targets for individuals and groups of pupils;
- (ii) produce a framework to support schools in systematically and consistently interpreting data and identifying performance targets in preparation for annual target setting reviews.

In consultation with secondary schools:

- (iii) urgently establish access to more effective support for senior managers of secondary schools;
- (iv) improve opportunities for the discussion and dissemination of effective management and sharing of good practice across secondary schools;
- (v) provide clearer guidance on agreed principles and procedures for secondary school review and evaluation, linked to target setting and development planning.

D. In order to improve provision for SEN, the following are required:

- (i) publication of a clear strategy which sets out the LEA's vision and timetable for the future development of SEN provision in mainstream schools; including the role of ELP;
- (ii) a full understanding by schools of the aims and purpose of the SEN funding allocation in their school budgets;
- (iii) agreement with schools and disclosure of the basis for each school's entitlement to services from centrally funded SEN provision, including the Educational Psychology Service;
- (iv) a fuller understanding by schools of details of the finances and service plans of all centrally funded SEN services and provision.

E. In order to produce more efficient planning and provision of school places the following is required:

- (i) improvement in the accuracy of secondary pupil population forecasts;
- (ii) urgent completion of the secondary review and the production of a clear statement of a view about the optimum structure for future provision;
- (iii) completion of the review of 16+ provision and implementation of the new structure by September 2001.

12. In addition to recommendations based on the findings of the 1998 inspection, and in order to address issues which have emerged since that inspection, the following additional recommendations are made:

- (F) In order to improve the partnership between the LEA and its schools it will be necessary to:
 - (i) consult with all schools about what form communications with them should take, and act on the outcomes;
 - (ii) establish for a for consultation with schools and governors, which are recognised by those groups as fully representative of them;
 - (iii) ensure that schools and other partners have full involvement in establishing, and confidence about, the strategic direction for education in Sandwell.

- (G) In order to ensure sound financial planning and management in the Department of Education and Community Services and Sandwell schools it will be necessary to:
 - (i) in time for the 2000/1 budget planning cycle, and with external assistance, review and improve the financial strategy for the education service and the planning and review mechanisms that underpin it;
 - (ii) review and improve the strategy for financing special educational needs, ensuring that budgets are planned, controlled and underpinned by a rationale understood by schools and parents;
 - (iii) in time for implementation in the 2001/2 financial year, and in consultation with schools, review and improve the LMS formula, including newly delegated elements relating to support services, to ensure that funding reflects equitably and rationally the different needs of schools;
 - (iv) improve the arrangements for headteachers and governors to engage fully in the Council's strategic planning and annual budget setting process and for their views to be considered by elected members before decisions are final;

- (v) take action to bring school budgets back into balance and ensure that all schools in deficit have agreed recovery plans that are realistic, monitored and achieved.

PROGRESS ON THE ORIGINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

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

- (i) *enable the Directorate to exercise closer oversight of the management and co-ordination of services;*

13. In 1998, LEA services demonstrated broad similarities in their management intentions and arrangements, although individual services had considerable autonomy. There was much variation in coverage, detail and costing and in the use of performance indicators. The expectation that routine communication and the sharing of intelligence about schools would happen naturally and be followed by useful action was only partly realised in practice.

14. The senior management team of the Directorate was subsequently increased by an additional appointment to 'Head of Leisure Services'. A new Departmental Management Team was in place from May 1998 and included the Director, Head of Schools, Head of Strategic Services, Head of Leisure Services, Finance Officer, Personnel Officer and the Community Race Equalities Officer. Monthly, strategic meetings are held for each service area with the Director, Head of Service and relevant service managers. A new middle management structure was agreed by Policy Committee in October 1999 and is now being implemented.

15. The restructuring of the department has been slow and remains incomplete. There is insufficient justification for the time taken to complete this restructuring. Its continuation even at a limited rate is dependent on the full implementation of third and fourth tier structures and rigorous management of individual and service targets.

16. There is little evidence that the changes in structure have been supported by a sufficiently rigorous approach based on performance targets for each of the services, co-ordinated and monitored by the Directorate Management Team and related to performance management of middle managers. Minutes of Departmental meetings at different levels and in different areas of the service make almost no reference to the Action Plan, the EDP, performance or target setting. Progress on this recommendation has been tardy and is unsatisfactory overall.

- (ii) *produce a manual covering all services and setting out functions, entitlements and options, means of access and costs;*

17. In 1998, with some exceptions, the basis on which services were provided was not clearly and systematically specified, costed and evaluated. Where services were weak

in this respect, staff and governors were uncertain about what to expect. Services were delivered differently to different schools without a sound rationale for the difference and energy was wasted in unnecessary negotiation and enquiry. Consequently, there could be no informed debate about service deployment, use and value for money.

18. A manual of all services attributable to 'devolved/delegated' budgets was published in September 1999 to inform purchases from April 2000. The manual sets out clearly the service specification and prices for those services whose budgets will be delegated on April 1st 2000. Schools were required to confirm by November 2000 their commitment to purchases for the full year beginning April 2000.

19. The manual has therefore been produced, but it has not had the effect intended. The production of a service manual was obviously not intended to be an end in itself but to facilitate an informed debate about service deployment, use and value for money. There is little, if any, evidence of such a debate being fostered in Sandwell and the available evidence points instead to a climate in which schools are discouraged from considering the full range of options which could be available to them. There is widespread concern amongst schools that there was insufficient consultation about which services should actually be subject to delegation. Equally the effect of the particular approach to delegation adopted by the LEA is to reduce the possibility of schools being able to make accurate comparisons with providers other than the LEA. This is because a school's budget share for particular services bears no deliberate relation to any of the factors which might relate to its actual need for or use of the service and therefore the true cost of its provision. There is no evidence that the LEA has taken steps to offer schools advice and information about alternative suppliers or that it has offered training in the role of schools as purchasers of services. Progress on this recommendation has not, therefore, been sufficient.

(iii) ensure a common approach to planning and evaluation across services and agree a process of annual review of delivery, involving both schools and Councillors;

20. At the time of the 1998 inspection there was not enough challenge, by schools or the LEA, about what services are provided, how they are provided and at what cost. There were problems in individual services which pointed to the need to improve management.

21. Some improvement in service management is now reported by schools, although the Director's position statement notes that not all senior managers have recognised the need to readjust the relationship between the LEA and schools. Some steps have been taken to involve schools, but not Councillors, in the monitoring of services through the Delegated Services Group. Although plans have been made to draw all services, including non-delegated services, into an annual pattern of review including evaluation by schools and reports to Committee, this process is only partially operational. Reference to performance and evaluation is not as prominent in the internal minutes of the service and departmental management groups as this recommendation would justify. As a result the LEA is not in a good position to implement Best Value. Overall progress on this recommendation is not satisfactory.

(iv) improve communication across teams so that intelligence of school needs is pooled to enable prompt, concerted action which meets them;

22. The co-ordination of service action was often a weakness at the time of the last inspection. The Directorate was overstretched and unable to give the close attention to the necessary supervision of connections between services. The expectation that routine communication and the sharing of intelligence about schools would happen naturally and be followed by useful action was only partly realised in practice.

23. The action reported in support of this recommendation is more directly related to the co-ordination of services overall than with the sharp direction and management of services in support of individual schools and, in particular, those identified as having difficulties. There is no forum where the full range of delegated and non-delegated services methodically pool and analyse evidence about school performance and manage the consequent interventions effectively.

24. Progress in this area has not been sufficient. From the service perspective, the planning and management of the co-ordination of responses to schools with weaknesses are still in need of development.

(v) consider again with schools which aspects of service delivery could be better served through delegation of funding;

25. The earlier report recognised the importance of considering greater delegation to improve service delivery. Many schools could argue, rightly, that in most service areas they were not given funding to exercise their discretion and judgement about service level, nature and cost.

26. As reported in (ii) above there is widespread concern amongst schools that there was insufficient consultation about delegation and what the consequent limits would be on schools options. The Delegated Services Group deals with strategic and operational matters for all delegated services and might in future consider modifying and extending arrangements, although this intention is not formally set out.

27. Progress on this recommendation has not been sufficient. The LEA has failed to create a climate of open discussion about these issues. There is deep dissatisfaction and some suspicion amongst schools about the processes leading up to delegation from April 1st 2000 and about the selection of schools for membership of the Delegated Services Group. There has been no serious attempt by the LEA to encourage a market in areas where it provides services. The approach taken by the LEA to service delegation in effect averaged the delegated amount per school and made that figure the service price. It did this rather than seeking to ensure the delegated sums to each school matched the cost of existing provision, and then giving schools a choice about varying their level of service. This failure undermines many of the potential benefits of delegation and is not consistent with the principles of Best Value.

(vi) rationalise the organisation of personnel services and consider how schools can receive broader advice on personnel management, including staff development.

28. In January 1998 support on personnel was shared between Schools Personnel Service and Schools Management with assistance from the Schools Support Branch. The allocation of work was not formalised, review of performance was informal, delegation of funds was partial. Some schools were unsure of their service entitlement.

29. The restructuring of the Department of Education and Community Services is going some way to meeting the aims of this recommendation. The new service manual offers a clear specification of the services which can be purchased by schools. There will be delegation of the funding to purchase the specified service, albeit with the considerable qualifications noted above about the formula for delegation.

30. Progress on this recommendation is unsatisfactory because it is incomplete. There is a clear specification for what constitutes a traditional personnel function but there is insufficient clarity in relation to staff development. There remain uncertainties about the extent to which schools have full choice about access to advice from outside the LEA as a result of the funding arrangements and no certainty about effective service liaison, especially with advisers.

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

- (i) *strengthen the arrangements for the co-ordination of school improvement work at the Directorate level;*

31. In 1998 the LEA had initiated a range of projects with a school improvement focus and which were operating in different parts of the authority. These were often funded through SRB or other external grant. Some schools were involved in more than one project and there was a lack of coherence and oversight of the impact of the projects by the LEA. It was also very difficult for the LEA to ensure that it addressed the needs of all schools according to the level of need because some of the projects operated in limited geographical areas of the LEA.

32. In response to the OFSTED recommendation the LEA set in place monthly meetings of the School Improvement team (now the Education Strategy Group), chaired by the Director. The forum was established in March 1999 and it is attended by the second tier officer responsible for schools services, as well as third-tier officers working in this branch. Minutes indicate that the forum met six times in the 11 months leading up to this inspection.

33. The LEA was slow to set up the Education Strategy Group and the meetings have not been regular. Although 'schools causing concern' is a standing item on the agenda the mechanisms to provide detailed information in relation to these schools are not yet fully developed. Advisers' reports on the schools are not routinely shared with the schools themselves and few details relating to progress and intended actions are recorded in the minutes. The forum enables the Director to have greater contact with, and input into, actions in relation to school improvement but only one second tier officer attends on a regular basis. As such, the meetings do not sufficiently address the

central issue of co-ordinating the work of the whole department in respect of school improvement. Overall, this represents unsatisfactory progress on this recommendation.

(ii) develop a more coherent and radical approach to improvement work in secondary schools;

34. The 1998 report identified substantial weaknesses in support to secondary schools. There was an absence of a coherent strategy to address the lack of progress in secondary schools. The LEA lacked sufficient secondary management and suitable subject specific expertise in the advisory service and did not facilitate access to a range of alternative external providers.

35. The LEA has supported secondary schools through various measures, particularly the SRB funded Secondary Curriculum Support Project. This has been used to provide direct inputs to individual schools and it has supported centre based courses and cross schools working groups. All subject areas apart from art and PE are now covered by specialist adviser/inspectors and, in line with EDP priority 4, the LEA is implementing a planned programme of subject area reviews in all secondary schools; including an audit of strengths and weaknesses. All core departments are to be monitored annually and other departments a minimum of every other year.

36. The SRB funded work has involved all secondary schools and has involved some evaluation in which heads express positive views about the support. The quality of some of this support is without question. However, there is no evidence of a full and rigorous analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of each school to enable a proper and coherent package of support based on greatest need. The first full analysis of this type is scheduled for the summer term. The LEA's own evaluations of the impact of the Secondary Curriculum Support Project find it difficult to identify substantial outcomes and the consultants' planning sheets do not consistently identify success criteria or the intended impact on standards and quality.

37. Similarly there has been limited analysis of LEA inputs through the STEPS (Sandwell Targets and Evaluation in Partnership Strategy) training programme in terms of its impact on standards in individual schools. The STEPS data shows evidence of improvement at Key Stage 3 (KS3) and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) but the rate of improvement is below that for the LEA's statistical neighbours and nationally; thus increasing the gap between performance in Sandwell and elsewhere. The programme of subject area reviews will eventually be of assistance in enabling the LEA to target its support more effectively, but it is excessive and will place a substantial burden on schools and the subject advisers. Importantly, this intention is not an efficient use of resources and is not consistent with the principle of intervention being related to the level of need.

38. The LEA has then been slow to begin to analyse properly the needs of its secondary schools and, as a result, measures to bring about improvement have not been sufficiently coherent. There have also been delays in the development of some of the data handling mechanisms such as the Information Technology (IT) database for the analysis of attendance, and the Quality Partnership Database which are intended to

enable a more strategic approach to support for these schools. Significantly there has been little in the LEA's approach which represents a radical approach to the low attainment and poor expectations which were identified in many schools at the time of the last inspection. There has been unsatisfactory progress on this recommendation.

(iii) set out the objectives, methods, resources and means of evaluation of all its curriculum services;

39. At the time of the first inspection there was little consistency in the quality of information about different curriculum services and schools were unclear about the methods used to evaluate service effectiveness. In general, the LEA was not in a position to establish the effectiveness of these services.

40. Schools now have a clearer understanding of the role and operation of the various curriculum support services. However, they remain unclear about the actual resources available and the precise basis for deployment of some teams such as the Curriculum Enhancement Team. Crucially the LEA has not set out its processes of evaluation clearly, and not involved schools sufficiently in the evaluation of centrally important services such as the advisory service. Schools report that there is significant variability in the quality of this support. In the Audit Commission survey schools judged the effectiveness with which the LEA evaluates services poorly in comparison with the other LEAs surveyed. Progress on this recommendation is poor.

(iv) produce an overview of the approaches to teaching, assessment and curriculum continuity being promoted by its various projects;

41. In 1998 there was a range of projects underway in the LEA. Many of the projects had a focus on improving standards and quality in the schools but there was no clear rationale or underpinning view about how the various approaches fitted with the LEA's vision for teaching, assessment and curriculum continuity.

42. The LEA has produced a brief leaflet about getting the most from LEA project and consultant support, and there is guidance for a visiting specialist. There are draft details of interrelationships between some of the projects and teams such as Quality Start, the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies and the work of the Curriculum Enhancement Team. Occasional courses and case studies have given further insights into relationships between projects. LEA project personnel now have network meetings to discuss these interrelationships. A recently produced guide on teaching and learning in Sandwell has now been distributed to schools.

43. The LEA has not produced the overview intended by the above recommendation. It has, however, done some work to clarify the objectives of the various projects and their linkages with the different support services. In documentation such as that for Quality Start Primary Standards, it sets out statements about good teaching drawn from the National Standards for Teachers, and the guidance on teaching and learning in Sandwell has been well received by most schools. In setting up the Quality Partnership project with St Martins College, Lancaster, which is designed to pick up from several of the SRB funded projects referred to in the recommendation, there is clearer initial

definition of objectives. More needs to be done to ensure that all schools recognise a coherence in the projects initiated by the LEA but progress on this recommendation has been adequate overall.

(v) audit and make a clear statement about the advice and activities which can be provided on subjects, and identify with schools how gaps can be filled;

44. At the time of the first inspection there were gaps in the specialist subject coverage by LEA advisers, and schools were not clear about the advisers' role and functions.

45. After the last inspection the LEA extended the range of specialisms covered by its advisory staff and it provided a list of LEA advisers and their specialisms, which was updated in summer 1999. The intended Quality Partnership Database has not been completed, but as part of the preparations for the Quality Partnership with an external provider a list of consultants and their specialisms has been drawn up. Schools have been consulted about the Quality Partnership arrangements but evidence about the responses from schools does not indicate that they all support the intended arrangement. Overall, progress on this recommendation has been adequate, though schools need further information about alternative providers of teaching and curriculum support in order to make more informed decisions.

(vi) quickly step up its work on numeracy, in particular taking action with secondary schools whose results are poor to promote greater success in GCSE mathematics or alternative accreditation:

46. In 1998 standards in numeracy were generally poor, although improving. GCSE results in mathematics were lower than the national average with a high proportion of pupils not being entered. The LEA had not been proactive in this area.

47. In keeping with its EDP priority 2, the LEA has helped all primary and special schools to implement the National Numeracy Strategy (NNS). All primary and special schools are said to deliver a daily lesson in line the NNS recommendations. Attainment at Key Stage 2 (KS2) has been raised to 56 per cent of pupils achieving level 4 or above in 1999. This is still very low compared to the national average of 68 per cent and is low compared to statistical neighbours, but it is nearly in line with the target agreed with the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) for the Year 2000. The LEA helped to identify its leading mathematics teachers and it has developed a web site to assist with the dissemination of good practice. In secondary schools the LEA has worked with the Black Country Careers Service to fund an advisory teacher who has supported targeted High Schools. Improvements in the teaching of mental mathematics are reported. Work has been done with a group of schools to pilot KS2/3 transfer and summer numeracy schools were held in 1999.

48. Improvements in numeracy at KS2 are better than those planned in the EDP. This represents important progress for the LEA. Overall standards of numeracy remain substantially below those nationally but Sandwell has made an effective start to the implementation of the NNS. Developments in the secondary sector are more mixed

with too many schools (10) showing declining standards at the end of Key Stage 4 (KS4) and a smaller number regressing at KS3. The performance data and some numeracy support materials developed by the LEA have the potential to support secondary schools, as does the guidance on teaching mathematics in special schools. Nevertheless, too much remains to be done to challenge and support secondary schools to raise attainment in this important area.

49. Progress in relation to primary schools has been encouraging, but the decline in standards in mathematics in approximately half of the LEA's High Schools is a serious concern. Overall progress on this recommendation is, therefore, unsatisfactory.

(vii) in devising its plan for responding to the National Literacy Strategy, ensure that:

(a) a systematic analysis of strengths and weaknesses in the teaching of literacy leads to more closely tailored support;

50. In 1998 support for literacy through the National Literacy Project varied in its effectiveness. Support for secondary schools was insufficient.

51. In keeping with its EDP priority 1, and working with the literacy consultants, the LEA has undertaken an analysis of strengths and weaknesses through a review of OFSTED reports and the Literacy Consultants' Audit. Schools' needs have been identified and support targeted effectively, especially in terms of the schools receiving intensive support. Progress on this recommendation has been good.

(b) elements of existing work in a variety of projects, including those affecting pupils with special educational needs and bilingual learners, are drawn together;

52. At the time of the first inspection there was insufficient coherence in the support being provided for literacy and that from other projects operating in the LEA, particularly those affecting pupils with special needs and bilingual learners.

53. Since 1998 the LEA has secured improved networking between its different teams through regular meetings. There is now a better flow of information between teams engaged in the different projects leading, for example, to useful reports about support and progress produced for literacy consultants and others from staff engaged in the quality start project. Progress on this recommendation has been sound.

(c) practical help is given to secondary schools on managing an effective approach to literacy development;

54. In 1998 there was insufficient support for secondary schools in relation to improving standards of literacy.

55. The LEA has since established a literacy strategy training programme for staff in secondary schools in line with its EDP priority 1. Training was provided in June 1999 through a KS3 literacy conference attended by senior secondary school personnel. All secondary schools are reported to have produced a Literacy Action Plan and whole school INSET is planned in the current academic year for most schools. The LEA

provides ongoing support at departmental level through the production of resources. Draft LEA guidelines on Literacy and Language have been produced.

56. Overall progress on this recommendation has been satisfactory.

(viii) review the operation of the Curriculum Access Project with a view to focusing the language enrichment team on bilingual learners, bringing the teachers concerned under school management, and merging the curriculum enhancement team with other support teams.

57. In 1998 the work of the Curriculum Access Team was poorly defined and, in part, poorly managed. There were two constituent teams. These were the Language Enrichment Team (LET) and the Curriculum Enrichment Team (CENT). The personnel from LET in part filled the gap left by the ending of Section 11 funded work with pupils from ethnic minorities. CENT personnel worked in schools to improve curriculum access of a range of pupils but this work often lacked a clear focus in schools.

58. After the inspection, the LEA organised an external evaluation which identified weaknesses in the management structure and a lack of understanding by schools of the criteria for deployment. An action plan was subsequently written and implemented by the LEA. This involved restructuring the management of the two teams. In line with the recommendations of the 1998 OFSTED report, the external evaluation suggested bringing the LET team personnel more directly under the management of headteachers, but this was not implemented. The work of the CENT personnel was refocused and guidelines sent out to schools regarding effective use of support teams.

59. Although anomalies in levels of responsibility related to pay still exist in the teams, their overall management is much improved and there is a clearer focus to their work. Internal evaluations are positive and schools appreciate the support provided, although the schools' survey established that primary schools judged support for ethnic minority pupils to be poor overall compared to the average for the other LEAs surveyed. Some schools remain unclear about whether they get a fair share of the support available from these teams although their understanding of the rationale for deployment of the LET personnel is improved. Deployment of staff from the LET (64 people) is done on the basis of an annual needs analysis which is completed for all schools. The deployment of the personnel in the CENT (10 people) is not sufficiently transparent to schools.

60. The improvements that have occurred in relation to the day to day management and focus of the work of these teams is now overshadowed by the imminent ending of the external SRB funding which has supported the work. Against the advice in the 1998 inspection, and that of the external consultant, the LEA retained central control of all the personnel and insufficient thought seems to have been given to what would happen when the funding ended. Now schools are rightly dissatisfied with the burden they face in relation to possible redundancies of these staff. Schools would face considerable difficulty in employing these staff from their own budgets. The strategic management of these teams has been flawed, and overall progress on the recommendation has been unsatisfactory.

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

- (i) *provide more pertinent, wide ranging and intensive support for secondary school managers on common whole-school issues;*

61. The previous inspection judged that the LEA gave very good assistance on the appointment of senior staff; new headteacher appointments were one of the key factors in improvements in management in the majority of secondary schools visited. Other aspects of support for management had also improved, especially in some under-performing schools. Advisory support was variable in quality and limited in scope but had made an impact in some schools.

62. OFSTED inspection evidence indicates some improvement in the management and efficiency of schools since the last LEA inspection, although starting from a low base. Early evidence from the second round of inspections of secondary schools indicates a greater rate of improvement than nationally in the lowest performing schools, but no schools inspected for the second time have yet been judged to have good overall management and efficiency.

63. The LEA has identified a number of whole school issues and has taken steps to provide more intensive support in those areas. It has established a programme of school and curriculum reviews in schools causing concern; developed and introduced an LEA teaching and learning policy; actively involved secondary schools in the implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies; and is working on related issues of primary to secondary school transition. These are pertinent issues for secondary education, and the LEA has successfully integrated much of this work into its wider EDP strategy.

64. However, by its own admission, the LEA did not involve schools from the outset in identifying issues. It therefore did not address the issue highlighted by the last inspection of the lack of opportunities for "debate on issues of widespread relevance", particularly for its secondary schools. The continued absence of regular opportunities for detailed discussion between the LEA and headteachers on policy issues is symptomatic of the LEA's continuing reluctance to enter into real partnership with its secondary schools. There has also been a failure to systematically engage with secondary headteachers in identifying and disseminating good practice.

65. The LEA has made satisfactory progress in implementing some pertinent initiatives but it has not adequately addressed a key issue at the heart of the recommendation. As a result the overall progress against this recommendation is unsatisfactory.

- (ii) *review its advice and improve the quality of school planning, aligning this with the use of performance data in setting targets;*

66. At the time of the last inspection more attention needed to be given to school planning, including monitoring and evaluation of the school's work. School

development planning was deficient in over half the secondary schools visited. Whilst the use of performance data was developing, there was considerable variation in its use across schools and more consideration needed to be given to its use in target setting.

67. Provision of data on pupil performance is rated as better than satisfactory by most primary schools surveyed, and guidance on its use as satisfactory; although this is still more critical than the average for primary schools in other LEAs. Secondary schools rate both aspects as good and above the average for other LEAs surveyed. Support for school self evaluation, planning and target setting are rated as less than satisfactory with primary schools giving these aspects one of the lowest ratings of all LEAs surveyed. Special schools are most critical, rating all aspects as unsatisfactory with guidance on the use of data in particular rated as poor and amongst the lowest in LEAs surveyed so far.

68. The LEA is still in the process of improving its guidance to support school planning. The LEA model for school development planning for primary schools is basically sound but progress has been too slow. The planning model, based on the EDP, was piloted in the summer term 1999 but take up by schools has been uneven. There remains a lack of effective systematic guidance on school development planning, monitoring, review, and target setting for secondary schools. Progress in this respect has been poor.

69. In general the LEA has made significant progress in its collection, analysis and provision of data, particularly to primary schools but there has been little done to develop support for special schools. There has been some effective work in developing value added analysis to support schools and the LEA in predicting and setting performance targets. The LEA acknowledges, however, that it does not yet provide all primary schools with the guidance they need to effectively interpret and use this data, and that primary headteachers' understanding and effective use of data still varies unacceptably. Unlike secondary schools, primary schools are not yet provided with individual school profile data and analysis, or any systematic framework for interpreting and using the data to identify targets in preparation for target setting and review procedures. The LEA plans to introduce these improvements later this year, but this is late.

70. The LEA has not adequately explored with all primary schools the basis for identifying challenging targets. The LEA's own analysis of schools' performance data has tended to focus strongly on using value-added data and predictions to assess whether the LEA's overall targets for literacy and numeracy will be achieved. This is, of course, a legitimate concern, but schools report this often continues to dominate the target setting process. The LEA's STEPS project, in its infancy at the time of the previous inspection, is providing some effective support to secondary schools but the number of advisory visits linked to separate stages of data analysis and target setting is excessive.

71. Overall progress on this recommendation is unsatisfactory. The strategies now in place to support planning and target setting in primary schools are, however, sound

and should ensure that satisfactory progress is made and sustained in the future. Progress on improving guidance on the quality of planning in secondary and special schools has been poor.

(iii) create a management development programme which covers different groups of staff and provides systematically for needs to be specified and met;

72. At the time of the previous inspection the LEA lacked a systematic management development programme, with insufficient courses, fora for discussion, or documentation to provide adequate opportunities for briefing, stimulus or debate for both senior and middle managers in its schools. In several respects the LEA has made some significant progress. Nevertheless, continuing weaknesses in its identification of needs and support for senior managers in secondary schools means that overall progress has been unsatisfactory.

73. The LEA now provides a more comprehensive development programme. Given the resources at its command, it provides a reasonable balance of LEA courses to support the needs of differing groups of staff, including newly appointed headteachers. The quality of its support for recently appointed secondary headteachers remains too variable. A number of externally funded initiatives have provided middle and senior managers with opportunities for training in management skills and to consider key aspects of school management. The LEA has taken reasonable steps to improve support to subject staff in secondary schools through subject forums led by advisory staff.

74. Overall, the primary and secondary schools surveyed rated support to headteachers and senior managers as broadly satisfactory, although below the average for other LEAs surveyed so far. Support to subject leaders is rated as less than satisfactory with primary schools giving this aspect of support one of the lowest ratings of all LEAs surveyed. Special schools are critical of both aspects, rating them as less than satisfactory and below the average for other LEAs surveyed.

75. The LEA's developing professional relationship with St Martins College, Lancaster, is designed to provide additional consultancy and support for schools, including management and efficiency. This goes some way to providing schools with access to expertise outside of the LEA, although the LEA does not systematically provide schools with information on alternative providers of support.

76. The LEA has set up the Sandwell School Improvement Partnership (SSIP), to identify and support staff with particular expertise who might benefit the LEA, or have the potential for rapid professional development. A relatively small proportion of these staff has been used to support schools, particularly those causing concern. The LEA has also introduced some limited school twinning. These initiatives are noteworthy. Nevertheless, not all headteachers are clear about the long term outcomes of these initiatives for themselves or their schools and most of this support is targeted on primary schools. The LEA has not used these or other strategies effectively to pool and share expertise, in order to address the gaps in secondary management expertise in the advisory service. Applications for four seconded posts are now being

encouraged, but the LEA has not acted vigorously enough and progress has been too slow.

(iv) provide school managers with a greater consciousness of cost-effectiveness, including the use of services.

77. At the time of the last inspection there was insufficient information available to schools about the real costs of many services, and few headteachers were in a position to consider the extent to which services provided value for money.

78. The LEA now provides more details to schools about the services it supplies, but there is still too little open discussion about relative costs compared to other providers. The culture fostered by the LEA still encourages too much dependence on LEA services (See A(ii) above). Progress on this recommendation has been poor.

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

(i) take action to rationalise its special school provision in the light of its shift in policy;

79. The LEA has had a steadily increasing number of surplus places in most of the special schools. The number of surplus places was most acute in the Moderate Learning Difficulties schools. In addition, all nine of the local special schools have inappropriate and poor quality accommodation and premises. The LEA had been reviewing its school provision for a long period of time and the schools themselves had differing views about the direction developments should take.

80. Progress on this recommendation has been satisfactory overall, although it has been cautious. The major review of all day special schools has now been completed. The radical plan is for the nine special schools which were reviewed to be closed and replaced by three new special schools. This proposal has been approved by the Council and is being considered by the school organisation committee (SOC) in February 2000. The LEA anticipates that the SOC will approve the proposal for implementation from September 2000 to July 2004. The process has been thorough, and although not all parties are in agreement there is now a rational basis for the future of special schooling in Sandwell. The proposed new schools would have viable populations and would be geographically convenient.

81. The LEA has taken some time to get to this point but this approach has made approval in February more likely. The whole package would result in Sandwell having a lean special school provision, which is more appropriate for the next ten years. A weakness of the process was that the review did not take account of the potential implications for the LEA's schools for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties. However, this will begin once the SOC has made a decision.

(ii) maintain the rate of improvement in the processing of statements of SEN and ensure that pupils in specialist provision are covered by statements;

82. At the time of the last inspection the LEA was not meeting the required timescale for producing statements, and was failing to process statements to a timescale which would overcome the backlog.

83. The progress made on this recommendation has been substantial, but the rate of processing statements needs to continue to improve. The LEA has now standardised procedures and processes and introduced new IT systems to improve the efficiency of the processes. There have been some technical problems, but the new system is now in place and the LEA is able to prepare 70 per cent of proposed statements within 18 weeks. There is, however, a need for a more coherent approach to presenting and using data on the performance and review of pupils with SEN. Increasingly data is available in different parts of the service and needs better co-ordination.

(iii) produce full specifications for enhanced learning provision, covering admissions, organisation, expenditure and monitoring;

84. At the time of the previous inspection ELP existed in a few mainstream schools but there had been only a brief outline of what the LEA expected from this new development. ELP was envisaged as an important part of the LEA's inclusive policy and the major means of supporting the needs of a range of pupils with statements in mainstream schools. There was inconsistency in practice and variability in provision, and the evaluation and monitoring of ELP was insufficiently clear.

85. The LEA has continued to allocate ELP to mainstream schools so that seven secondary and 23 primary schools now have ELP. Two secondary and 11 primary schools have ELP for more than one special need. Draft specifications have been prepared by the SEN group, and these have been consulted upon by the working groups but not by all schools with ELP. A process for monitoring provision has been agreed and a paper was presented to the Schools Committee in December 1999. It did not detail the cost of this provision and provided no evidence to support the assertion that strategy was successful in terms of pupils' progress. This important report has not been sent to schools who have or hope to have ELP.

86. ELP is developing totally separately from the special school provision. A small number of special and mainstream schools have established links, but these are the result of individual schools efforts and they are not being planned for or co-ordinated by the LEA. The special school review saw the emerging special schools as "centres of excellence" but there is no evidence of an LEA approach to plan and integrate the expertise and experiences in both ELP and special schools. Too much of the planning and documentation has been officer led and there has been limited involvement of special and mainstream schools. As a consequence schools are confused, suspicious and critical of a development that in principle they all support. The LEA responses to the earlier OFSTED inspection do not mention the sharing of good practice, views, ideas or information with both the mainstream and special schools. The promised regular meetings of ELP personnel do not appear to be taking place.

87. Progress on this recommendation is unsatisfactory and there is little sign of a secure basis for sustained improvement. The implementation of this provision has

been too piecemeal and appears to schools to be *ad hoc*. Systematic data on pupil progress has not been produced although ELP have been in operation for some years in some schools. A strategy for the LEA to analyse the developments and keep schools informed has not been established yet. Some monitoring of ELP has taken place but the present arrangements are insufficiently demanding of schools. There is insufficient data about the extent to which pupils' needs are being met and progress enhanced. At present the LEA does not know whether the provision is "economic, efficient and effective", an aim stated at the end of the committee paper.

88. Consultation has been poor. Schools have not received sufficient detailed information about the whole ELP strategy, and how it links with changes to SEN funding and the re-organisation of special schools. Experienced staff and responsible managers in mainstream and special schools have not been central to the implementation of the strategy. The funding and organisational implications of moving towards a position where "all secondary schools will develop enhanced provision for SEN" have not been considered fully.

(iv) sustain its efforts to ensure better understanding in schools of funding for SEN and how they should plan to use it to best effect.

89. In 1998 many schools had a poor understanding of the formula used to allocate SEN funds and so could not predict the amount they would receive. Schools, moreover, did not properly reflect their SEN allocations in decisions about spending and could not demonstrate that it was used for the intended purposes. Schools could not express a judgement about the impact of LEA or school funded SEN provision or, therefore, about value for money.

90. A suitable approach to this recommendation is outlined in the LEA Action Plan. However, action on revising guidelines, extending the SEN audit and developing a new funding formula is incomplete and has had limited effect. Many schools still do not understand the relationship between the money the LEA spends on SEN and the money it has left to delegate to schools. They see SEN money as an extra fund, and demand for these resources has increased. The LEA has admitted that this is a very serious problem, and the Director has written that it is "having a significant and deleterious impact on the LEA's ability to properly fund mainstream educational provision". Despite this, no effective strategy has been developed to address the problem.

91. The proposed reorganisation of special schools will reduce the number of surplus places in special schools, but this will free up only limited funds in the earlier years. Meanwhile, the LEA's strategy for SEN will mean that more pupils will be included in mainstream education and most of these pupils will require additional funding to meet their needs. The LEA has sought the advice of the District Audit and it is acutely aware that action is needed but, as yet, no strategy has been presented to show how it will make an impact in the financial year 2000/2001. There are discussions about a different system for funding mainstream SEN but this is considered unlikely to take place prior to the financial year 2001/2002.

92. Very limited progress has been made in addressing the required improvements in SEN funding. Until a clear strategy emerges it will be impossible for the LEA officers to provide schools with a better understanding. Whilst there is a large amount of documentation on the problems produced by the present system, there is no evidence of an agreed strategy at a very senior level to make radical changes to consult schools about the changes and the consequences.

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

- (i) *issue a revised policy on attendance, establish clear criteria for referrals to Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) and monitor casework and its outcomes;*

93. The previous inspection identified low rates of attendance overall, but some significant improvement in the previous year (1997). The Education Welfare Service (EWS) was judged to be well staffed and appropriately deployed; aspects of its work were effective. However, its overall effectiveness was reduced by the absence of a clear specification of the services provided, by weaknesses in its service plan, by an out of date policy, by limited administrative assistance and by inadequate monitoring of casework and outcomes. This left the service poorly placed to evaluate the effectiveness of its work, to analyse and disseminate relevant information on attendance, and to disseminate good practice.

94. Attendance rates remain below national averages in both primary and secondary phases. Nevertheless, the rate of improvement in attendance in both phases between 1995 and 1999 has been significantly greater than nationally; in secondary schools, for example, it has been over twice the national rate. Authorised absences are still well above the national average but have been reducing at the same rate as nationally. Unauthorised absence is in line with the national average in primary schools; it is still above average in secondary schools but has fallen in Sandwell, whereas it has continued to rise nationally. The extent of improvement in attendance in those schools with the most intransigent problems is more variable. Nevertheless, the LEA can, with some justification, point to effective improvement in attendance and to the success of initiatives introduced since the last inspection.

95. The LEA has taken appropriate action and, overall, has made sufficient progress in implementing the recommendations. Planned developments should ensure that progress is sustained.

96. A revised attendance policy and EWS service manual have now been produced and are to be published in the Spring term. Delays in publication have principally been the result of the LEA, rightly, awaiting developments in national legislation. The new policy satisfactorily sets out the functions and operation of the service sufficiently, defines its tasks clearly, provides guidelines to schools on policies and effective practice, and defines appropriate criteria and procedures for referral. A number of externally funded incentive schemes and EWS initiatives such as truancy watch, and a

pilot scheme in the use of pagers, have been introduced. A programme of further school based training to support schools in implementing the new policy is planned for the Summer and Autumn terms.

97. The LEA has developed sufficiently robust electronic systems for recording and monitoring casework, and is now in a position to evaluate and target its own work more effectively. Schools, however, are still not adequately involved in formally evaluating the work of the service. A well defined specification for an electronic system for data capture and analysis of patterns of attendance has now been put out to contract; the LEA hopes to pilot the system in most secondary schools this term.

(ii) renew its advice on how schools can actively address poor attendance and ensure that link advisers pursue action with schools where necessary.

98. The revised policy and service manual provides appropriate guidance on how schools can address poor attendance. There has been progress in ensuring that advisers have the evidence to identify and monitor schools where improving attendance is a priority. Links between the EWS and the advisers have been strengthened. Advisers have received training on the new policy led by the EWS and termly meetings between the services pool available data. Nevertheless, formal liaison between advisers and EWOs to monitor and evaluate schools' progress in improving attendance still needs to be established. The extent to which the LEA ensures individual advisers pursue action rigorously enough with schools is also contingent on the strengths and weaknesses of the service's monitoring procedures. Secondary schools report that these are still too variable. Nevertheless, overall progress on this recommendation has been satisfactory and should be sustained.

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

(i) undertake routine analysis of fixed term exclusions, school by school and by ethnic group, and act on the outcomes;

99. At the time of the previous inspection the LEA did not routinely analyse data on fixed term exclusions. The inspection also raised some questions over the LEA's procedures for ensuring that excluded pupils received appropriate work or tuition during periods out of school.

100. Evidence from schools, professional associations and the LEA suggests that there has been improvement and that the LEA has made sufficient, if modest, progress in undertaking routine analysis of exclusions. At the time of the last inspection permanent exclusions from primary schools were in line with the national figures. The rate of exclusions from some secondary schools was high and rising across the Borough as a whole.

101. Initial data has been analysed school by school as recommended and emerging patterns are beginning to contribute to multi-agency planning to tackle the emerging needs. The LEA's initial analysis of data indicates a higher incidence amongst Afro-

Caribbean boys; a reflection of the national picture. The rate of exclusions levelled off in 1998, against the increasing trend of previous years. The LEA is now in a position to take more substantial action in the light of that analysis.

(ii) secure prompt and appropriate placement for all pupils permanently excluded from schools.

102. In 1998 the LEA was providing adequate advice to schools to ensure that exclusions were used appropriately and it had adequate procedures to monitor permanent exclusions. It actively pursued reinstatement or alternative places for excluded pupils, but it did not monitor the time out of school before permanently excluded pupils were found alternative provision.

103. Schools surveyed this time judged advice on exclusions to be generally satisfactory but, in common with schools in other LEAs surveyed so far, Sandwell schools continue to be critical of alternative provision for excluded pupils, secondary schools rating it as poor. Evidence suggests, however, that there has been improvement. The key to the LEA's recent progress has been the development, with the agreement of secondary headteachers, of its "Strategy for the Education and Reintegration of Excluded Pupils", implemented this academic year. The new strategy provides for equitable distribution of excluded pupils across all secondary schools in the borough. A Reintegration Panel meets weekly to manage placements. The aim is to provide pupils with a new place in mainstream schools within 15 days of exclusion, or a 6 week placement in the relevant key Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) for further assessment to identify whether mainstream or specialist provision is most suitable. Placements are monitored by the EWS.

104. This strategy is well integrated into EDP priorities supporting wider LEA initiatives including continuing development of 14-19 curriculum provision. Developments in work related learning and extending accreditation opportunities have been actively pursued by the LEA. The LEA has anticipated recent initiatives; setting up 8 in-school centres and ensuring every school has nominated staff and mentors to support pupils most at risk of disaffection or exclusion. Cross-service links have been improved. The Behaviour Support Service and EWS are closely involved in the delivery of support. Other service links, for example with the School Improvement service, have been established in principle but now need to be formally put into operation.

105. The LEA has made effective, and in a number of respects good, progress in addressing this recommendation. Early indicators show that actions have resulted in more prompt assessment and reintegration of excluded pupils into mainstream schools. The LEA's evidence indicates that it has been successful in achieving its aims over the timing of placements and assessments and is, therefore, achieving government targets well ahead of schedule. The LEA is not yet in a position to provide an appropriate placement in its own KS4 PRU for all pupils requiring one, but is investigating alternative work-related provision wherever possible. The LEA's projections indicate that PRU provision, although unable to fully meet demand at the moment, is adequate if its inclusive education strategy is effective. The LEA is confident that its EDP target of reducing permanent exclusions by 80 per year by 2002 will be met. The actions it has taken put it in a strong position to sustain, and improve on, the progress made so far.

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

- (i) *as it intends, review secondary places and the provision made for sixth form education;*

106. At the time of the previous inspection an overall 12 per cent surplus of places in the secondary sector was projected to reduce to 5 per cent; one-third of schools had 25 per cent of their places unfilled while several were more than 5 per cent above capacity. The District Audit had already made a recommendation for a review of provision. Some sixth forms had only small numbers and this position could be reviewed along with the wider secondary provision.

107. The LEA has established three working groups to review secondary provision in general and VI Form provision in particular. The groups took separate areas of focus: Places, Inclusion and Curriculum. Consultation is now taking place on the future of one secondary school which is undersubscribed at around 40 per cent occupancy. Discussions are taking place between all the 16+ providers in Sandwell to develop a borough wide consortium approach to sixth form provision. Specific proposals for the structure of sixth form provision with a timetable for implementation by September 2001 are now being considered by schools, colleges and other providers.

108. Progress on secondary school places has not been sufficient. There has been no reduction of places since the time of the last inspection. Progress on sixth form education has been sufficient but needs to be accelerated to meet the September 2001 deadline.

109. It became apparent soon after the 1992 review that secondary school places in Sandwell would continue to be in surplus for the foreseeable future, but action has not been quick enough to avoid the consequent drain on already stretched budgets. Audit reports still refer to the difficulties in forecasting pupil numbers. The Management Letter from District Audit in November 1999 states: "The accuracy of secondary forecasts has worsened since 1995/96".

110. There are difficulties about matching rolls to schools across a borough with significant local loyalties and demographic variation. However, these issues are not peculiar to Sandwell and do not fully explain the slow rate of progress in resolving the overall surplus. The LEA has not produced a comprehensive statement of its view on the optimum structure of secondary provision for the future, and it is only now consulting on the future of the first school to be considered. This represents slow and unsatisfactory progress.

- (ii) *review its policy, practice and expenditure on home-to-school transport.*

111. The last review of home to school transport was in 1993 and the LEA budget of £1.865m in 1997/98 provided support for a relatively high proportion of pupils. This recommendation directed the LEA to consider this position.

112. The LEA commissioned District Audit to review and advise on its policy, practice and expenditure in this area. District Audit reported in February 1999 with twelve recommendations, all of which were accepted by the LEA. The majority of the recommendations have been implemented and there is part implementation and work in progress on all the others. Progress on this recommendation has been good.

NEW ISSUES SINCE THE 1998 INSPECTION

113. The prime focus of this revisit to Sandwell LEA has been to examine progress on the recommendations from the 1998 inspection. It is clear, however, that there have been significant shifts in the circumstances and attitudes in the LEA since the last inspection and these directly impinge on the capacity of the LEA to sustain future improvement.

114. Essentially, many schools have lost confidence in the leadership provided by the LEA. Much of that loss of confidence, as reported to HMI through a range of meetings and written submissions, surrounds the strategic leadership being provided by officers in relation to the vision for future development within the LEA, the monies available to schools, the strategic management of key support services, and the quality of the partnership between the LEA and its schools.

115. The schools are not clear where the LEA sees itself going. They recognise that the EDP has set out the agenda in relation to school improvement, but schools do not have a good understanding of how this fits in to a bigger vision of strategic development within the LEA. The precise role of ELP as a strategy for inclusion, ELP location within mainstream schools and the relationship to special schools are examples of the failure to communicate an overall strategy and coherent vision for the future of Sandwell schools.

116. Schools are, rightly, concerned about the impact of some strategic management decisions in relation to the support for schools and pupils. The LEA's ability to sustain its work on minority ethnic achievement is currently compromised by one such decision. In 1997, Sandwell moved the main elements of its work in this area from section 11 funding (which it believed was due to end) to SRB funding for a three year project. The position now is that the SRB project will end on March 31st 2000 and in the absence of an exit strategy by the LEA the work of the team and the associated contracts will have to terminate.

117. The LEA is now looking to the EMTAG Standards Fund to underwrite the continuation of the work, albeit in amended forms. However, the EMTAG formula is linked historically to previous section 11 and EMAG funding and in Sandwell's case will only generate about a quarter of the current spend supported by the SRB. As a result the LEA has advised schools that, unless they can fund posts from the school budget, they need to be prepared to make redundant at least some of the staff currently supported by the SRB. Significantly, in this respect the LEA did not put into effect the recommendations of the 1998 report which would have clarified the role of schools in terms of the management of these teachers.

118. Sandwell LEA's recent approach to budget planning and strategy undermines the limited progress that has been made against the recommendations of the 1998 OFSTED inspection and severely limits the potential to make further sustainable progress. Several features of the LEA's approach give considerable cause for concern.

119. There is no evidence of a purposeful policy for dealing with the increasing budget

problems faced by schools. The Individual Schools Budget (ISB) for Sandwell schools is, on average, close to that of comparable LEAs. The ISB for Sandwell primary schools in 1999/2000 is £1580 compared with £1605 for its statistical neighbours and £1583 for metropolitan LEAs. The equivalent figures for secondary schools are £2346, £2398 and £2334. Despite this, a very large majority of Sandwell schools are experiencing significant budget difficulties.

120. At the end of 1998/99, 11 per cent of primary schools and 50 per cent of secondary schools had a deficit in excess of 2.5 per cent of their budget. Although some continue to operate with surpluses these surpluses are, overall, reducing. The Director of Education reports that for the 1999/00 financial year approximately one third (40) of the mainstream schools and one special school were “unable to set a budget that would sustain a reasonable educational provision within their delegated share”. A further 81 schools were only able to set balanced budgets by the use of existing surpluses to supplement their budget share. This means only 15 schools in the LEA were able to set a budget within their delegated share.

121. There are several possible reasons for this highly unsatisfactory position including weaknesses in the LMS formula, and poor support and challenge by the LEA of schools’ budget management. The ISB figures quoted above suggest that general underfunding of schools is not the cause.

122. At the start of the inspection the Director anticipated that the 2000-2001 budget position for schools would be easier than the 1999-00 position because a ‘one-off’ SEN overspend would not be repeated. However, budget planning during the inspection week predicted only an approximate 0.4 per cent increase in the ISB in real terms for 2000/01 (after discounting new Fair Funding delegations required to pay for services). The majority of schools have expressed major concerns about the continuing decline of their budget position and are either not aware of or are not convinced by any proposals to address this problem.

123. Historic overspends on the SEN budget are now having a marked impact on the ISB. For a number of years, the LEA’s budgets for supporting pupils with an SEN statement in mainstream schools have been overspent. On the basis of reportedly informal arrangements with the Borough Treasurer these overspends were regularly written off. As a result the Department of Education and Community Services did not deal with their full implications. However, in the current financial year the Department has been required to repay the 1998/99 overspend of approximately £1.4m and to increase the base budget for mainstream statements for 99/00 by £1.2m without any directly related increase in the overall budget. The total reduction of approximately £2.6m has had a major impact on school budgets. The Director of Education reports that this problem took all of the £1.9m additional resources allocated through the rate support grant to Sandwell for 1999/00, plus an additional £700,000 pounds in other income and savings.

124. Additional pressure on the schools’ budget has arisen as a result of the Council decision that the education budget would need to establish a fund for early retirement without directly related additional resources. This requirement had previously been covered by central reserves, which the Council could no longer maintain. The Director

of Education has reported that this led to a reduction of £650,000 in individual school budgets.

125. Moreover, the overall budget position of Sandwell schools is £800,000 worse than appears in the sum of their individual budgets. This is as a result of an agreement, brokered by LEA and other council officers two years ago, in which all schools collectively committed £800,000 of their shared balances as a 'loan' to be repaid against savings at a later date. This device exacerbates the schools' budget problems described above.

126. Results from the recent Audit Commission survey show that the relationship between the LEA and its schools in the areas of financial planning and budget strategy is now unusually poor and possibly close to breakdown. Schools were critical of their ability to influence LEA policies, plans and procedures. They were also unhappy about the consultation on planning of the education budget and the clarity and fairness of the formula for allocating funding to schools.

127. This high level of dissatisfaction, bordering on mistrust, was a regular and widespread feature of other written and oral commentary from schools to the inspection team. Many schools are now more critical of aspects of the partnership such as consultation and communication. At the time of the 1998 inspection the Audit Commission school survey highlighted concerns including communication, clarity of the funding formula and knowledge of the schools by the LEA. However, in schools most headteachers regarded these issues as temporary and there was a clear mood of optimism that they could be and would be addressed by the LEA. This has not proven to be the case. The most recent survey shows that these aspects continue to be of concern to headteachers and, significantly, the optimism that these will be addressed has dissipated. Overall, there has been a significant deterioration in the quality of the partnership between schools and the LEA.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT PLAN

128. The EDP is based on the LEA's own audit of strengths and weaknesses and, appropriately, the priorities it identifies draw upon some of the weaknesses reported in the 1998 OFSTED inspection. This report shows that progress on those weaknesses has been too variable. More fundamentally the EDP has been flawed because schools' engagement with the EDP process has been unsatisfactory, and the LEA has failed to convince many schools about the relevance of its priorities.

129. The EDP sets eight priorities for school improvement. These relate to the need to:

1. raise standards in Literacy;
2. raise standards in Numeracy;
3. achieve excellence in Early Years;
4. raise standards in all subjects at KS3 and KS4;
5. intervene in under-performing schools;
6. develop qualifications and opportunities for all;
7. improve the quality of teaching at all key stages;
8. improve the quality of leadership and management.

130. Progress on aspects of the first two priorities has been satisfactory or better. This is particularly so in relation to the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy and National Numeracy Strategy and is evidenced by important improvements in KS2 results.

131. However, the picture is too inconsistent. Poor progress in addressing numeracy at KS4 has already been identified in this report. Whilst there is clear evidence of some progress in priority 5, given that five schools were helped out of Special Measures in the period between May and November 1999, the LEA's own procedures for early identification and intervention in schools with weaknesses are not completely secure. Although the LEA has begun to implement a potentially useful system of Early Warning Indicator Logs to identify poorly performing schools, some schools are openly sceptical about the extent to which they are known by the LEA. In the Audit Commission survey primary schools judged the LEA's knowledge and understanding of schools very poorly compared to the average in other LEAs, although secondary schools placed this slightly above average. Without a good knowledge of all its schools the LEA cannot support or intervene according to need.

132. The progress in implementing priorities 4,7 and 8 is undermined by inconsistent challenge to schools. The EDP does not address the principle of challenge as much as it should, particularly given the recognition that teachers' expectations need to be raised. Some schools acknowledge that the LEA does too little to challenge them to improve, although others feel there is too much challenge. Whilst this reflects a typical range of responses there is evidence that advisers do not always give schools an unequivocal view of their performance following LEA monitoring, particularly in relation

to the quality of management. Until this occurs as a matter of routine the LEA cannot claim to provide sufficient challenge and it cannot achieve all of its EDP priorities.

133. The LEA has completed its own evaluation of progress on the implementation of its EDP between April 1999 and December 1999. In that evaluation the LEA often identifies progress on structural actions, for example on establishing written guidelines and setting up working parties. Whilst this progress is important these actions are often the easiest to achieve. The outcomes in terms of improvements in standards and quality in Sandwell schools are often longer term and not yet quantified. However, those outcomes rely more heavily on the quality of the partnership between the LEA and its schools. That partnership has already been shown to be seriously flawed.

134. The LEA's relationship with its schools is called into question further with regard to the EDP. Consultation with schools on the EDP was unsatisfactory. Consultation was judged very poorly by primary and secondary schools compared to the average for the other LEAs surveyed in the Audit Commission survey. Worryingly, the relevance of the LEA's priorities to primary schools was also judged significantly below the average for the other LEAs surveyed. This has major implications for the overall success of the LEA in implementing its EDP. It is clear that the LEA has not worked sufficiently closely with its schools to establish a shared agenda for improvement. Without such an agreed agenda the EDP represents a set of worthy but unrealistic aspirations and Sandwell LEA cannot be as successful as it must be.

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