

Inspection report
MILTON KEYNES
Local Education Authority

Date of inspection: September 2002

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Basic information

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Lead inspector:	Miriam Rosen HMI
Date of inspection:	September 2002

Introduction

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

2. The inspection was based on a range of materials, which included self-evaluation undertaken by the LEA, and data, some of which was provided by the LEA. That material also included school inspection information; HMI monitoring reports; audit reports; documentation from, and discussions with, LEA officers and members; focus groups of headteachers, other teachers and governors; staff in other departments at that local authority; diocesan representatives and other partners. In addition, the inspection team considered the earlier Ofsted/Audit Commission report on this LEA (published in February 2001). A questionnaire, seeking views on aspects of the work of the LEA, was circulated to all schools, and its results were considered by the inspection team. The response rate to the questionnaire was 69 per cent.

Commentary

3. Milton Keynes was established as a new unitary authority in 1997, and has a young and growing population. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups is slightly below the national average. It continues to serve a relatively affluent population, although there are pockets of significant social and economic disadvantage. Levels of pupil mobility are high. The organisation of schools remains complex, with a mixture of first, middle and combined schools.

4. In general performance in the primary sector is weaker than that in the secondary sector, although secondary schools show a wide range of performance. Pupils' performance continues to be below the national average and that of similar authorities at Key Stages 1 and 2. At Key Stage 3, and for most of the Key Stage 4 indicators, pupils' performance is average. The 2002 provisional results show a higher rate of improvement than nationally for most indicators.

5. In the previous inspection, held in the autumn of 2000, the LEA's weaknesses were found to outweigh its strengths. The inspection team at that time believed that the LEA had the capacity to improve, but not in meeting special educational needs, or in those areas of social inclusion which were unsatisfactory.

6. Since then, the LEA has improved almost all of its functions. Most are now performed to a satisfactory or good standard. The major area of weaknesses remains special educational needs, where difficulties in recruiting staff have contributed to inadequate progress and schools are not receiving a satisfactory service. However, this area is now fully staffed and is in a good position to make the necessary improvements. Support for school improvement, which was relatively strong at the time of the previous inspection, has continued to improve.

Strengths

There are particular strengths in:

- the strategy for school improvement;
- the leadership, management, expertise and value for money of services to support school improvement;
- the definition of monitoring, challenge and intervention;
- the extent to which the LEA's support is focused on areas of greatest need;
- support for literacy;
- support for numeracy;
- support for Key Stage 3; and
- asset management planning.

Weaknesses

The following weaknesses remain:

- the LEA's functions in relation to special educational needs;
 - support for curricular information and communication technology (ICT);
-

- removing surplus school places;
- support for looked after children; and
- property services.

7. Since the previous inspection the leadership provided by elected members and senior officers has improved. Elected members have increased spending on education up to the level of the education Standard Spending Assessment. The new administration, elected in May 2002, is committed to maintaining education as a priority. In order to raise standards at all key stages, the LEA is proposing to rationalise the age of transfer. This proposal is currently being consulted on. However scrutiny of education by members is weak.

8. Services for education have been brought together in a single education department, whose leader has been designated the chief education officer. This has enabled a much sharper focus on educational issues. The chief education officer, together with other senior officers, has driven forward improvements in many areas of the education service. Performance management is well developed in the education department and has aided the improvement process. However, the positioning of the education department at third-tier level within the council does not reflect the high priority placed on education by the council, or the national prominence given to education.

9. Liaison with children's services, a weakness previously, has improved although some difficulties remain, for example in the effectiveness of the liaison between schools and social workers. In general the extent to which actions across the council's directorates are inter-related to support educational priorities is under-developed.

10. The LEA's performance overall is satisfactory. Now that the staffing shortages in the area of special educational needs have been resolved, the inspection team is confident that the LEA has the capacity to act on the recommendations made in this report and to continue to improve its effectiveness.

Section 1: The LEA strategy for school improvement

Context

11. Milton Keynes was established as a new unitary authority in 1997. It continues to have a young and growing population. The school age population has increased by two per cent since 2000, and on 17 January 2002 was 35,134. Thirteen per cent of the pupil population are from a minority ethnic group, which is slightly below the national figure. The largest minority group is Indian. Although overall numbers are relatively small, since 2000 the number of pupils of Black African heritage has doubled to 616, and there has been a 15 per cent increase in pupils of Pakistani heritage to 501. The number of asylum seeker and refugee children has doubled, to 224, in the last 12 months.

12. Overall, Milton Keynes continues to serve a relatively affluent population, although within this there are pockets of significant social and economic disadvantage. The authority ranks 185th out of 354 on the average of ward scores in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's Indices of multiple deprivation 2000. The rank of income is considerably higher. In 2001, 14.7 per cent of primary pupils and 13.2 per cent of secondary pupils were eligible for a free school meal, which is slightly below the national average.

13. The proportions of pupils with statements of special educational need in 2001/02 were 3.2 per cent for primary aged pupils, and 5.9 per cent for secondary aged pupils, including those in special schools. This was above the national average and is a slight increase compared with the situation at the time of the previous inspection. Interim figures for the current year indicate that there is likely to be a further increase.

14. The organisation of the 106 schools remains complex, as at the time of the last inspection. There are: two nursery schools; 12 nursery classes attached to first/ combined schools; 38 first schools (age 4-8); 31 combined schools (age 4-12); 17 middle schools (age 8-12); 10 secondary schools (age 12-18); six special schools; 25 departments for pupils with special educational need attached to mainstream schools, and two pupil referral units (PRUs), one of which is the tuition center. Since 2000, three new schools have opened, a first and a middle school have amalgamated and two secondary schools have been significantly extended as part of their phased development. There are relatively small numbers of voluntary controlled and voluntary aided schools (six of each). Five schools have foundation status and bids for four more schools to change to foundation status have been approved recently.

15. Data held by the LEA indicate that many pupils change schools several times during each phase of their compulsory schooling. Average pupil mobility in the primary sector, at nearly 20 per cent, is considerably higher than the national median figure of 11 per cent. This adds to the challenge faced by the LEA and schools in raising standards.

Performance

16. Overall, pupils' performance continues to be below the national average and that of similar authorities¹ at Key Stages 1 and 2. At Key Stage 3, and for some of the Key Stage 4 indicators, pupils' performance is average. Between 2000 and 2001, rates of improvement varied considerably and in some cases performance fell back. Generally, there was a better rate of improvement than nationally at secondary level. The 2002 provisional results show improvement in most indicators at all levels but the gap between the highest and lowest performing secondary schools is still high.

17. The LEA's baseline data continue to show a profile of pupils' attainment on entry that is weaker than the average of those LEAs undertaking the same assessment.

18. At Key Stage 1 in 2001 the proportion of pupils attaining Level 2 and above in national tests and tasks in reading and mathematics continued to be below the national average and that of similar authorities. Attainment in writing was broadly in line with the national average but below the average for similar authorities. Between 2000 and 2001, performance in reading decreased very slightly while performance nationally increased slightly. In writing, attainment increased at almost twice the national rate (a 1.9 per cent compared with a 1.2 per cent increase). In mathematics the rate of increase was similar to that found nationally. Provisional results for 2002 show a three per cent increase in pupils gaining Level 2 and above for reading, a one per cent increase in writing and no increase in mathematics. This is a higher rate of improvement than that found nationally.

19. At Key Stage 2 in 2001, the proportion of pupils attaining Level 4 and above was well below the national average and that of similar authorities in English and mathematics. It was below the national average and well below that of similar authorities in science. Results in both English and mathematics deteriorated compared with 2000. In mathematics the decrease was greater than the one per cent recorded nationally, and nationally English results remained static. Results in science improved between 2000 and 2001, but not as much as nationally. Provisional results for 2002 show a three per cent and a four per cent increase respectively in English and mathematics while results in science remain static. The rates of improvement in English and mathematics are greater than those found nationally.

20. At Key Stage 3 in 2001, the proportion of pupils attaining Level 5 and above was close to the national average in English, mathematics and science and that of similar authorities in English and mathematics, but below that for similar authorities for science. Between 2000 and 2001, performance in English fell by 2.4 per cent against a very slight rise nationally. In mathematics and science performance improved at more than twice the rate found nationally. Provisional results for 2002 show an increase of three per cent, which is higher than the national average in English. In mathematics performance remained static against a slight national improvement. In science results remained static both locally and

¹ Milton Keynes's statistical neighbours, as defined by Ofsted, are Peterborough, Bracknell Forest, Swindon, Telford & Wrekin, Poole, West Berkshire, Northamptonshire, South Gloucestershire, Cambridgeshire & Torbay.

nationally. The improvement in the proportion of pupils gaining Level 6 and above is higher than that found nationally in all three subjects.

21. At Key Stage 4 in 2001, the proportions of pupils attaining 5 or more grades A* - G at GCSE, one or more grades A* - G and the average point score were in line with the national average and that of similar authorities. The proportion of pupils attaining at least five or more grades A* - C was below the national average and that of similar authorities. Between 2000 and 2001, there was a small improvement in the proportion of pupils attaining five grades A* - C, from 41.9 per cent to 43.2 per cent, which was better than the national rate of improvement. The average points score also rose slightly, at approximately the same rate as found nationally. Provisional results for 2002 show increases in all indicators including a 3.0 per cent increase in the proportion of pupils gaining five or more grades A*-C, and a 1.4 per cent increase in the average points score. However, the gap between the highest and lowest performing secondary schools remains high.

22. Data based on average point scores indicate that between 1998 and 2001 pupils have made below average progress between Key Stages 1 and 2, but above average progress between Key Stages 2 and 3, and well above average progress between Key Stages 3 and 4.

23. The proportion of pupils who continue in education post 16 was 64.8 per cent in 2000/01, which was lower than the national average of 71.3 per cent.

24. Ofsted inspection judgments show that overall, in Milton Keynes, the percentage of schools on the primary phase judged to be good or very good in their last inspection is below the national average. The proportion of secondary schools judged to be good or very good in their last inspection is well above the national average. Analysis of the quality of teaching indicates this is relatively weak in primary schools.

25. In 2000/01, attendance in primary schools was in line with the national average (93.8 per cent compared with 93.9 per cent nationally). Attendance in secondary schools, at 89.8 per cent, was also in line with the average found nationally (90.8 per cent). Unauthorised absence at primary schools was below the national figure. Unauthorised absence at secondary schools was well below the national figure. This is similar to the position at the time of the last inspection.

26. The rate of permanent exclusions in 2001 was above the national average in primary schools, at 0.5 per 1000 pupils compared with 0.3 nationally. The secondary exclusion rate of 0.8 per 1000 pupils was below the national rate of 2.1, but has increased to 1.9 per 1000 pupils in 2001/02.

Funding

27. The council has increased its spending on education, which is now similar to the national average. At the time of the last inspection, the LEA's expenditure on many education services was significantly below average. Although the Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) per pupil on education was close to the national average, education was funded by the council at a level significantly below this. This situation has now changed. The council's medium term strategy for 2002-05 clearly identifies education as a high priority and action has been taken to redirect resources to it. For 2002/03, the SSA per pupil remains close

to the national average but the council now allocates 100 per cent of the SSA to education. This is a substantial achievement given the competing demands on resources.

Academic Year	SSA for education £M	Net expenditure on education- £M	Expenditure as % of SSA
2002/03	101.14	101.14	100.00
2001/02	103.01	100.95	98.00
2000/01	97.02	93.36	96.23
1999/2000	92.70	89.02	96.03

28. There have been a number of changes in patterns of central funding within the local schools' budget (LSB) since the previous inspection. Some elements have increased. In 2000/01, funding for access was below the national average. In 2002/03, it has increased to £70 per pupil compared with the national average of £48. Similarly, central administrative costs have risen from national levels in 2000/01 to 22 per cent above in 2002/03. At £59 per pupil, the figure for central administrative costs is close to the government's target of £60 for 2002/03. Other elements within the LSB have decreased relative to national averages. In 2000/01, expenditure on special educational needs was three times higher than national levels but is now average.

29. Overall, delegation to schools within the LSB has increased to 87 per cent in 2002/03, which meets the government target for delegation and is very close to the national average of 87.3 per cent. The amount delegated by the LEA has increased by 10.1 per cent since 2001/02, which is one of the five largest increases in England.

30. In 2001/02, the secondary individual schools' budget (ISB) per pupil was two per cent above the national average and six per cent above the average of its statistical neighbours. The primary ISB was five per cent lower than the national average but still two per cent above average for its statistical neighbours.

31. The LEA has achieved considerable success recently in securing external funding. Take up of the Standards Fund was maximised and stood at £14m in 2002/03. Seed Challenge grant of £283k was secured; an increase of 65 per cent compared with 2001/02. A Basic Need bid of £36m is currently being made. The LEA recently secured a grant of £1m from the DfES as part of the Classrooms of the Future Initiative. The LEA is not eligible for regeneration funding.

Council structure

32. Full council elections took place on 2 May 2002. This resulted in a change of overall political control to Liberal Democrat. The make up of the council is now 27 Liberal Democrats, 16 Labour and eight Conservative councillors. Prior to the May elections the Labour group formed the administration but there was no overall majority.

33. The structure of Milton Keynes council has changed since the previous inspection. The council has been operating a cabinet and scrutiny committee system since September 2001.

34. Since the previous inspection there has also been a major restructuring of the education service. The former school effectiveness and early years services team has been converted into an education department, and the head of that service (a third-tier post) retitled head of education and designated chief education officer. The chief education officer reports to the strategic director, learning and development, who reports to the chief executive. The learning and development directorate encompasses four departments: education; children's services; community and economic development; and finance and performance.

35. The education department comprises four divisions, each with a divisional manager. The four divisions are: standards and effectiveness; special education and inclusion; early years and access; planning and resources. Teams dealing with capital and assets, planning and information, the school system review and schools' client role are now included within the education department.

The LEA strategy for school improvement

36. The overall LEA strategy for school improvement is good, and progress on implementing it is sound with some good features. The previous inspection judged the Education Development Plan to be clear and appropriate. Progress on implementing it was judged to be sound, although the LEA had not met its targets for reducing exclusions and there was slippage in implementing the priority for information and communication technology (ICT).

37. The strategy for school improvement encompasses the second Education Development Plan, the Excellence Cluster Plan, and the relevant local Public Service Agreement (LPSA) action plans. The three plans are well aligned. The LPSA and the Excellence Cluster action plans extend and complement the Education Development Plan. The Excellence Cluster is well focused on three areas of particularly high need and low standards.

38. The second Education Development Plan is based on a thorough audit which draws on a good range of types of data, including evaluations of the implementation of the original Education Development Plan and of the action plan following the previous inspection of the LEA. Useful summaries of strengths and weaknesses are presented. The audit provides a good justification and under pinning for the school improvement programme. However, a reluctance in the audit to compare performance with the LEA's statistical neighbours, as defined by Ofsted, means that opportunities are missed to challenge schools further and achieve the levels of comparable authorities.

39. Despite this, the targets set for 2004 are very challenging, and include 'stretch' targets set when the council entered into a LPSA with government in April 2001. The aggregated schools' targets for 2004 are slightly below the LEA's 2003 targets, except for Key Stage 2 English, where the gap is significantly below at five per cent. The LEA

recognises the gap and states for each key stage its proposal to target particular schools, to help them to close the gap.

40. The school improvement programme covers local and national priorities well. There is, for example, a specific programme of activity aimed at improving the attainment and progress of pupils in those schools affected by high pupil mobility. Relationships with other plans and responsibilities for specific actions are set out clearly. Success criteria are helpfully precise, and should aid the monitoring process. Activities are well targeted at particular groups. In most cases the links between actions, activities, targets, priorities and success criteria are clear. The themes of social inclusion, supply of teachers, special educational needs and minority ethnic pupils are all well covered within the plan.

41. Progress in implementing the strategy for school improvement is sound with good features. The LEA's own evaluation demonstrates that the implementation of the original Education Development Plan was in the main effective. The areas where too little progress was made were identified as developing family support for learning in the early years, and improving the leadership and strategic management of special educational needs. The findings of this inspection also show that too little progress has been made with developing support for curriculum ICT. The majority of the targets for 2002 set in the original Education Development Plan have been met or nearly met. The exceptions are the Key Stage 2 targets, where there is a significant shortfall, and secondary exclusions, which have risen in the last year. The gaps between the targets set for 2002 at Key Stage 2 and actual performance are 12 per cent for English, nine per cent for mathematics and two per cent for science. The LEA has put in place specific initiatives to help close the gap in these areas.

42. Schools in the school survey rated the quality of the LEA's planning for school improvement, and the relevance of the LEA's priorities to them, as between satisfactory and good. Since the last inspection the LEA has made good progress in the development of its strategy, and sound progress in its implementation. Its capacity for further improvements is good.

The allocation of resources to priorities

43. The previous report found that limited progress had been made in aligning resources to priorities, and that there was no medium-term financial planning. Since then, improvements have been put in place and performance in this area is now highly satisfactory. A three-year medium-term plan has been agreed by members which confirms education as a high corporate priority. It commits the council to funding education at 100 per cent of Standard Spending Assessment and passing on any future increases to schools to sustain the raising standards agenda.

44. Funding allocations within the education department have been changed to support its priorities. Most significantly, the previous report identified the amount spent on placing pupils with special educational needs in schools outside the authority as a significant obstacle to delegation. This element was reduced from £2.9m to £1.75m between 2001/02 and 2002/03. Access is now better funded than the national average, reflecting the LEA's priorities.

Within the individual school budget, resources were reallocated in 2001/02:

- the primary individual school's budget increased by 15 per cent, reflecting the LEA's intention to strengthen work at Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2;
- in 1999/2000, funding for special schools had been 11.8 per cent below national levels. Funding per special school pupil increased by 21 per cent reflecting the LEA's stated policy; and
- the gap between primary and secondary funding was reduced.

45. There are strengths but also weaknesses in the way schools' budgets are monitored. The external auditor reports that effective monitoring and support services are provided to schools to assist with the management of budgets. The number of schools ending the year with budget deficits of more than 5 per cent has been reduced from 26 in 1999/2000 to 10 in 2001/02. However, the LEA's arrangements for monitoring and supporting schools with high budget surpluses are underdeveloped. The 2001/02 outturn figures show a gross surplus balance of £6.7m compared with £3.1m in 1999/2000. The LEA has limited knowledge of the reasons for these high surpluses, but wrote in July to schools with surpluses asking for an explanation.

Recommendation

In order to make the best use of available resources:

- procedures should be strengthened for working with schools to identify and reduce inappropriate or unplanned budget surpluses.

Structures to ensure continuous improvement, including Best Value

46. This area was described as unsatisfactory in the previous report. Progress has been made and it is now satisfactory, but with some weaknesses. The council has put in place a performance management framework which has been implemented well throughout the education department. A service plan, team plans and individual appraisals are now in place and linked to the LEA's targets in the Education Development Plan. Monitoring arrangements are sound. This framework provides an effective means for driving improvement. There is improvement in capacity in key areas particularly in management of special educational needs.

47. A range of corporate support services such as finance, human resource management and ICT, have been the subject of Best Value reviews. With a partner county council, the council is now proposing to enter into a major external partnership with a private company for the provision of a full range of management support services across all council departments including education. A decision will be taken later this year.

48. No Best Value reviews have been carried out in the education department itself. The original proposal to review special educational needs in 2000/01 was deferred because of a major programme of changes following the last Ofsted inspection. This represents a missed opportunity to subject an area of poor performance to external comparison and challenge.

The LEA's capacity for self-evaluation, as demonstrated in the statement prepared for this inspection, is good.

Section 2: Support for school improvement

Summary

49. The LEA's support for school improvement is an area of strength. It gives good value for money. Most functions are carried out very well. The highest priority is given to improving schools and raising pupils' attainment. The LEA's revised Code of Practice for LEA – school relationships sets out very clearly the rationale and strategy for monitoring, supporting, challenging and, where necessary, intervening in, schools. The standards and effectiveness division provides the main thrust for school improvement. It is well led and very effectively managed. Performance management is very well established and is reaping benefits. There is strong capacity for improvement. Self-evaluation carried out by the chief education officer of the services to support school improvement, and their effectiveness is very largely accurate. The support for curricular ICT, and that focused on helping the PRU to emerge from special measures are the weakest areas. Other services are also focused on school improvement, and provide support that is, with the exception of support for special educational needs, mainly effective.

Monitoring, challenge, support and intervention

50. The LEA has now defined clearly these functions which are well understood by headteachers. The previous inspection report recommended that the LEA should clarify the number and purpose of visits made by officers to schools to bring them in line with the government's Code of Practice for LEA – School relations. Appropriate action has been taken, and, following extensive consultation, comprehensive guidance has been produced which sets out clearly how the LEA will monitor, challenge and intervene in schools.

51. The revised internal code of practice is a good document which sets out very clearly the LEA's rationale and strategy for monitoring, challenging, supporting, and, where necessary, intervening in schools. The criteria for categorising schools are clear, as are the procedures for monitoring, challenging or supporting schools in the varying categories. Headteachers understand the rationale underpinning procedures and are aware of the forms which intervention can take. They also have a sound understanding of how they are challenged through target setting, benchmark data and the discussions with the school's attached adviser. The principles of developing self-managing and self-evaluating schools are also well understood by headteachers.

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

52. The effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring and challenging schools is highly satisfactory. The last inspection report recommended that the LEA should discuss, agree and implement with all secondary schools a range of strategies to help raise standards in the weakest schools. An adviser with management experience in secondary schools has been appointed and now works effectively as attached adviser for all secondary schools. The needs of the weakest schools have been identified accurately and support has been well targeted. For example, in particular schools where attainment was low, focused literacy and numeracy support has been provided which has resulted in improvements. Much remains to

be done, however, to help the weakest schools raise standards further, but there is now a firmly-established framework for school improvement and the standards and effectiveness service is committed to supporting those schools in greatest need while challenging the remainder. The LEA's assessment of its strengths and weaknesses in monitoring and challenging schools is well balanced and accurate. There is strong capacity for improvement.

53. The previous inspection report identified weaknesses in the database on pupil performance and in the support and guidance given to special schools in data analysis and target setting. Good progress has been made. All schools now receive comprehensive data on the LEA's schools which can be interrogated and used for benchmarking purposes. In addition, special schools receive data which includes details of pupils' performance against P scales and comparative information about similar schools in other local authorities. Individualised pupil data is kept by the LEA which is now being used to track pupils, measure progress, compare attainment and target activity. There is a rolling programme of training for schools who need help in order to enable them to use the data effectively. These improvements have aided schools in developing their autonomy.

54. The LEA has responded positively to the task of enabling schools to raise pupils' attainment and, backed up by good data, has identified the high level of pupil mobility as a factor impeding progress towards achieving the targets set. A high quality publication *Changing faces in our schools* has been produced and was launched at a summer term conference. Its aim is to help schools reduce the impact of mobility on pupils' educational progress. Comprehensive guidance is included on effective induction, assessing pupils on entry, and developing inter-agency collaboration. This document has been very well received by school staff.

55. Headteachers and teachers acknowledge that the city has an increasing and highly-mobile population which presents challenges to the LEA and its schools. However, a number of teaching staff have an unduly unfavourable overview of the city's context and of the challenges they face, which does not fairly match the city's position in the national context. This view is endorsed by officers who are reluctant to accept the validity of comparisons with the LEAs identified by Ofsted as statistical neighbours, as they do not feel these LEAs have similar socio-economic characteristics. As a consequence, opportunities are missed to challenge schools further and achieve the levels of comparable authorities.

Recommendation

In order to raise the expectations of schools, and to challenge them and its school improvement services further:

- the LEA should use data from those authorities defined by Ofsted as statistical neighbours against which to compare its own performance.

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

56. When last inspected, the LEA's support for schools causing concern was judged to be satisfactory, with no areas of major weakness. Little fieldwork was carried out in this area. However, the position remains the same. Satisfactory progress has been made. At the

time of the last inspection one secondary school was deemed to have serious weaknesses. It has made considerable progress and is no longer a concern to the LEA although it awaits its next inspection before its progress can be reviewed by Ofsted. Targeted and clearly-focused support, which is rated highly by the headteacher, helped to bring about these improvements. When the LEA was previously inspected, the secondary PRU had been a cause for concern and was deemed to require special measures. Its categorisation remains the same. The support provided for the PRU, which has now been subject to special measures for nearly two years, has until recently been insufficient and not well focused. LEA support is now more clearly targeted and the appointment of an acting headteacher who will remain in post until a permanent replacement can be found has been an appropriate move.

57. The LEA's intervention strategies have also been successful in ensuring that no further schools have become subject to special measures or defined as having serious weaknesses.

Support for literacy

58. Support for literacy was judged to be highly satisfactory in the previous inspection report. It is now good. The percentages of children reaching the expected level in Key Stage 1 and 2 tests in English remain below the national average and that for similar authorities but the rate of improvement is better than the national average. Targets set are challenging, but the progress made towards their achievement is encouraging.

59. The literacy team is well led and its work is clearly focused and targeted on those schools where pupils' attainment is low. Members of the literacy team are knowledgeable about the subject and about each school's individual needs, to which they respond well. The team has established a strong partnership with schools, of which it is rightly proud. School staff are able to select from a wide range of courses and also to plan and arrange bespoke training which is held in the school. The survey indicated that schools rate highly the support they receive. Teachers regard themselves as being well informed and kept up to date with developments through the extensive range of high quality courses and support they are offered and which they rate highly.

60. The literacy team analyses data and Ofsted inspection reports on schools in order to identify areas for improvement. Teachers are helped to use performance data and to analyse results to inform their work. Pupils' attainment has risen the greatest in those schools which have received the highest levels of support, and attainment in spelling has risen as a result of the increased emphasis on teaching phonics and the successful catch-up programme. The under-achievement of boys has been targeted for specific work and a Beacon School has been used to help to disseminate good practice. A small-scale research project into boys' writing is currently being undertaken by 12 schools across Key Stage 2 and is due for completion in the spring term when its findings will be disseminated.

61. The literacy team co-ordinates its work very well with the Key Stage 3 strategy and the work of the numeracy team. Joint literacy and numeracy conferences have been held and literacy co-ordinators have valued this consolidated approach. There are good channels of communication between literacy and numeracy consultants and attached advisers. The ethnic

minority achievement service team is involved appropriately in literacy training, as are teaching assistants.

Support for numeracy

62. Support for numeracy was reported to be good in the previous inspection report. It continues to be good. Pupils' attainment at Key Stages 1 and 2 is below the national average and that of similar authorities. Improvements in performance at Key Stage 1 are above those nationally, while those in Key Stage 2 performance, after dipping in 2001, are better than the 2001/02 national picture. Although there is some way to go to achieve the targets set, the improvements are promising.

63. The numeracy team has been strengthened by the permanent appointment of the mathematics adviser, who is the line manager, and the securing of a strong and well-informed team which works across the primary phase. The LEA uses training of identified officers and secondments well to fill gaps when they exist and to extend the team when this is found to be necessary. Schools regard highly the support they receive in numeracy. The consultants analyse data and Ofsted inspection reports to identify those schools in greatest need and then work with them to determine the level and type of support which they will receive. Schools have been helped to analyse results and previous test papers in order to identify where improvements need to be made.

64. The work of the numeracy team has been rightly focused on Key Stage 2 where there were perceived weaknesses, but support has also been provided for Key Stage 1 staff. The work of the numeracy strategy is well co-ordinated with that of the literacy strategy and the work of the attached advisers. Good links have also been established between the work of the numeracy team in Key Stage 2 and the Key Stage 3 initiative. The numeracy team evaluates the feedback from training courses and follows up its enquiries in schools in order to determine how schools have benefited from course attendance.

65. The work of consultants in schools is carefully planned and reviewed and the outcomes used to inform performance management systems, as well as the attached adviser's monitoring records. School staff value the reviews which are carried out the end of the period of support, and they and the LEA believe that the more precise the review, the greater the help provided for the school in target setting and planning. The resource centre for numeracy and literacy is valued not only as a place where co-ordinators can research materials, but where they can also seek advice and meet with colleagues.

66. The LEA has secured the commitment of headteachers and co-ordinators to raising attainment. Those schools which have needed the highest levels of support have received it and there is tangible evidence in those schools of pupils' attainment improving at a rate greater than the LEA average.

Support for information and communication technology (ICT)

67. Support for ICT in the curriculum has improved since the last inspection but it is still unsatisfactory overall and weaknesses outweigh strengths.

68. The education department's planning is focused on developing infrastructure and the management of information but insufficiently emphasises aspirations for pupils' attainment, ways of monitoring this at all levels and practical activity to raise attainment and secure assessment.

69. Pupils' attainment at Key Stage 3 in 2001, as assessed by teachers, was below the national average at both Levels 5 and 6. The LEA has set a challenging LPSA target of 75 per cent of pupils achieving Level 5 and above for ICT by 2004 and an interim target of 67 per cent for 2002. Provisional data for 2002 show that the Key Stage 3 target was narrowly missed by 0.6 percentage points. While this represents considerable improvement in performance in some schools, in almost half of schools attainment has gone down. Half of the schools provide accredited courses at Key Stage 4. At the time of the inspection data on the number of pupils leaving school with a qualification were not available.

70. The LEA does not currently collect information from its schools about pupils' attainment at Key Stages 1 and 2. Instead, the LEA uses information it gathers from Ofsted reports and from schools' ICT development plans to identify progress in the primary sector. Ofsted data show there are fewer primary schools where pupils' ICT progress is good compared to similar authorities and the national average. Progress is poor when compared to the other core subjects in schools in Milton Keynes. Ofsted data, although based on only four schools, indicate that pupils' progress is improving at Key Stages 3 and 4.

71. In light of the emerging picture, the LEA decided to focus the support provided by the consultant on the primary sector. However, support given to intensive schools is overly concerned with drafting school ICT plans and providing advice about software resources and is insufficiently focused on improvements at classroom level to bring about direct improvement in children's learning in ICT.

Recommendation

In order to improve support to schools for ICT in the curriculum:

- intervention and support should be focused on work in the classroom to bring about direct improvement in children's learning in ICT.

72. In the survey, schools were critical of the support for curricular ICT and mixed views were expressed in the focus groups. The level of dissatisfaction has changed very little since the last inspection. The LEA is not giving sufficient advice on assessment, leveling of pupils' work and target setting and is not meeting schools' needs.

Recommendations

In order to improve support to schools for ICT in the curriculum:

- provision of advice and support to schools should be secured to enable teachers to assess and level pupils' work confidently and accurately; and
- in agreement with primary schools individual pupils' data should be collected from primary schools.

73. The authority has allocated National Grid for Learning (NGfL) resources to schools and all but three schools have met the 2002 national targets for ratios for numbers of computers to pupils. The LEA monitors school development plans, although feedback and the usefulness of this to schools are variable. Significant progress has been made by the LEA in connecting all of its secondary schools and twenty of its primary schools to broadband internet connections. This was achieved a year in advance of the national target and plans are underway to connect the remaining schools. Use of the LEA's website is growing and the authority is developing resources for schools to use to support learning, although this is at an early stage. The LEA has undertaken a survey to gain an overview of the impact of broadband. This has shown that the technology has yet to be fully utilised by schools beyond the use of internet and e-mail. The LEA has put in place satisfactory policies and systems to protect pupils from undesirable materials.

74. The use of New Opportunities Fund for ICT training for teachers has been monitored satisfactorily and all schools are participating. Up-to-date figures were not available, although those that were showed the number of teachers completing training was similar to the national average.

75. Schools have largely made their own arrangements for the technical support for computers used for curricular purposes and few problems were reported with the arrangements.

76. The LEA has a system for sharing best practice through termly meetings for ICT teachers and attendance is satisfactory. The ICT adviser and consultant have provided some training on the use of ICT in other subjects, including collaborative work with literacy and numeracy consultants resulting in successful joint conferences. Headteachers have been briefed about broadband, school ICT development plans and NGfL. The LEA has recently appointed two additional ICT consultants as part of the Key Stage 3 strategy and has introduced a leading ICT teachers' scheme to disseminate best practice. The LEA has also joined a national project to explore the use of interactive whiteboards. These developments are too recent to identify impact but, together with intentions to extend support for cross-curricular use of ICT and further technical developments, they indicate that the LEA has the capacity to move forward.

Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3

77. The LEA's support for raising standards at Key Stage 3 is good. The LEA has prepared schools well for the strategy and plans for implementation have a number of strengths. They are clear, well aligned with the national strategy and designed to address local priorities and needs arising from the large number and diverse range of schools involved in the strategy.

78. Pupils' attainment since the last inspection has continued to improve at a faster rate than the national average and that of similar authorities. Provisional results indicate that pupils' attainment at Level 5 and above in the Key Stage 3 tests in 2002 was close to the national average in English, mathematics and science. This unverified data indicates that the enhanced interim targets for 2002, set by the authority as part of its local public services agreement, will be met in English and science. However, the target was just missed in

mathematics and in ICT. The LEA is aware of this and is taking action to address the issue. In 2002 the proportion of pupils attaining higher levels (Level 6 and above) improved substantially in English and is above the national average. Performance in mathematics, although improved, remains just below the national average. Performance in science remains below the national average, and that of girls is well below national results. The LEA is aware of a varying picture of attainment between boys and girls across the authority and some schools have been more successful in closing the gap than others. The strategy manager is exploring the reasons why and developing strategies to tackle the issues.

79. The strategy manager leads a knowledgeable and effective team. The LEA has been largely successful in appointing two consultants for each strand. There remains a vacancy for a second mathematics consultant although this is being covered well by secondments which make use of local expertise and an advanced skills teacher.

80. Literacy and numeracy strands are firmly in place and are well co-ordinated. Plans for science and information communication technology are at an early stage although those schools which will receive support from the consultants have been identified. Planning for teaching in the foundation subjects links well with literacy and mathematics strands and in particular builds upon earlier work developed jointly by the LEA and the Open University on the application of thinking and reasoning skills in English and the humanities.

81. The LEA has used cluster groupings of secondary, middle and combined schools for training to increase awareness of the range, depth and quality of work required at Key Stage 3 and to focus dialogue on learning and continuity between sectors. Schools rate as excellent the training and support they have received and the implementation of the strategy by the LEA.

82. The LEA is using its data well to target support on schools with low attainment, undemanding targets, high pupil mobility and high turnover of staff. The LEA's own evaluation of the strategy indicates that catch-up programmes, summer schools, training and focused support by literacy and mathematics consultants are effective and that attainment is improving in targeted schools. Information from progress tests used with Years 7 and 8 is being analysed in order to further target support to needs.

Support for early years

83. The last inspection reported that good progress had been made since April 1999 and that the DfES had accepted the Early Years Development and Child Care Plan. That progress has continued and current provision is very satisfactory.

84. The council has invested the Early Years Development and Child Care Partnership with real power, and has asked it to oversee the roll out of provision for all three-year olds. Provision for four-year olds is being managed by the LEA. The commitment to partnership working is a strength. It has had a positive and significant impact on provision. For example, the extended day care offered jointly by a private sector provider and a school could not have been achieved without the effective co-operative working engendered by the partnership. This sense of partnership has allowed a start to the rollout of performance management from schools in the maintained sector to all providers.

85. The early intervention programme is also a strength of the LEA and the partnership. This is indicated by the creation of new nursery classes in disadvantaged areas; targeting the development of the neighbourhood nursery initiative in 10 disadvantaged areas; targeting the growth of child minder services in the 20 most disadvantaged areas; targeting the growth of extended day care and integrated provision; increasing the number of nursery places designated for children with special needs and promoting child care.

86. The LEA has also, after extensive consultation, worked with schools to introduce a properly funded change to main-stream school admission policies to secure a single point of entry in September following a child's fourth birthday. The LEA has a satisfactory capacity to improve this function still further.

Support for minority ethnic groups, including Travellers

87. Support for ethnic minority pupils and Travellers is now highly satisfactory and good progress has been made to address the recommendations of the previous inspection. The inspection report indicated that the support for minority ethnic pupils was satisfactory overall but had a number of weaknesses. At the time, too little training on teaching English as an additional language was being provided. In order to improve this, a recommendation was made that effective arrangements for joint working with schools on the national literacy strategy should be adopted and that data on the achievement of minority ethnic groups in schools should be disseminated. The recommendation went on to indicate that the LEA should work in partnership with schools to target under achievement. There was a further recommendation that the work undertaken by the ethnic minority achievement support service (EMASS) in schools should be monitored and evaluated.

88. The ethnic minority achievement support service, and the Traveller education service, have benefited from being repositioned within the standards and effectiveness division and from the leadership provided by the adviser for ethnic minority achievement who was newly appointed at the time of the previous inspection. The strategy is sound and the dedicated team works closely with schools. The guidance and support materials which EMASS provides are informative and comprehensive. Support staff at different levels are appropriately involved in the work of the literacy and numeracy strategies.

89. The LEA monitors the take up by schools of the service and follows up cases where there appears to be a need for support but where schools choose not to buy back the support from the LEA. Volunteers from the different minority communities are trained and they work alongside pupils providing support in their home language as well as in English. Schools judge the level of support provided by the LEA for ethnic minority and Traveller pupils as insufficient: they would like higher levels of support than they receive. However, the level and quality of support are judged to be satisfactory by the inspection team.

90. The proportion of ethnic minority pupils, at 13 per cent, is slightly below the national average. Pupils are from many and diverse ethnic groups, although numbers in some cases are very small. At the beginning of the current financial year, the LEA appropriately increased the funding for pupils for whom English is not their first language.

91. The LEA monitors its schools' intakes, inspection reports and the progress and attainment of minority ethnic pupils. These pupils are making good progress. LEA data indicate that minority ethnic pupils at all levels from beginner bilingual pupils to those taking GCSE are making at least satisfactory progress. For example, National Curriculum test results in 2001 indicated that pupils at the end of Key Stage 1 are one term behind those pupils for whom English is the home language. They also indicated that the attainment gap has reduced to less than one term in English and mathematics by the end of Key Stage 2, and that Black Caribbean, Indian and Pakistani pupils attain levels higher than the national average for pupils of those groups. The attainment of Bangladeshi and Pakistani pupils at GCSE is improving, as evidenced by the average point scores. Data on the attainment and progress of individual children, minority ethnic groups and cohorts are closely monitored and shared appropriately with attached advisers who, where there are significant numbers of minority ethnic pupils in school, are involved in target setting with headteachers. The EMASS service carries out a thorough and transparent audit of minority ethnic pupils, their needs, attainment and levels of English. The results are used to devolve the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant according to a revised and improved formula. However, there is a weakness in communicating details of fixed-term or permanent exclusion data of minority ethnic pupils to EMASS staff.

Recommendation

In order to keep EMASS staff informed fully about the experiences of minority ethnic and Traveller pupils so that they can help improve their attainment:

- procedures should be established which ensure that EMASS staff are involved in discussions on pupils who have been excluded or are at risk of exclusion.

92. The service has responded well when there has been an urgent need and has worked closely with schools, the police and community organisations to alleviate problems or reduce tensions.

93. The Traveller education service is now adequately staffed. Good links are reported with the Travellers management unit of the council which alerts the service to families moving onto unauthorised sites. Support is suitably focused and learning materials are provided for pupils whose residence in the city is seasonal. As reflects the national picture, the poor attendance at secondary schools of Traveller children continues to be a challenge to, and priority for, the service. Despite focused and strenuous efforts, this continues to be stubbornly resistant to improvement.

Support for gifted and talented pupils

94. The last inspection noted that support for gifted and talented pupils was at an early stage of development. This remains the case, and while the current arrangements are satisfactory, progress was initially slow and much of the work is very recent.

95. The LEA has set out a clear policy for supporting gifted and talented children which was developed in partnership with schools. It is supported by an audit of school provision which was conducted by the schools' attached advisers. Provision for these children is a

priority in the Education Development Plan and the LEA has started to run training events for schools which have been well supported and have been valuable. They have been targeted on needs identified in the audit. There has been an emphasis in this programme on accelerated learning and support for gifted and talented pupils in numeracy and literacy. There has been some dissemination of good practice. The LEA has run summer schools with a focus on mathematics, ICT and design and technology as well as art and modern foreign languages. The evaluation of these has been positive although that is in the short term rather than an examination of the medium to long-term impact.

96. The rates of improvement in pupils' attainments at higher levels for each key stage are similar to those at other levels. Schools have been provided with support by the LEA. However, only a minority of schools have a co-ordinator for gifted and talented pupils, or a register of such pupils although the LEA does promote both. The school survey shows broad support for the work of the LEA in this area. Support for gifted and talented pupils is a key theme in the LEA's Excellence Cluster programme with an emphasis on raising aspirations. The LEA has a satisfactory capacity to improve this function further.

Support for school management

97. During the previous inspection, support for leadership and management in schools was judged to be satisfactory although there were a number of weaknesses, one of which was in the lack of management support for secondary schools. Support for school management is now highly satisfactory, with a number of strengths. The recent appointment of an adviser with senior management experience in secondary schools who acts as attached adviser for secondary schools has strengthened the advisory team. This appointment has been welcomed by secondary school headteachers. Ofsted school inspection data indicate that management and efficiency in primary and secondary schools have improved between the first and second inspection cycles.

98. All schools have developed self-evaluation and review processes for which the LEA has provided support. There are structured management and leadership development programmes for newly-appointed deputy headteachers and headteachers and there is strong support for those attending the national leadership courses. A sound management development programme has been established for secondary school middle managers. There are comprehensive information packs for new headteachers and for new deputy headteachers and the established mentoring system for new headteachers is highly regarded and beneficial. Schools are provided with useful data on financial benchmarking which they can interrogate and use for benchmarking purposes against which to compare their own performance.

99. In practice, many schools are already active external purchasers. The LEA has also run training courses aimed at helping schools to become more informed purchasers in line with Best Value principles. There are plans to produce guidelines for schools and more training courses.

Support to governors

100. The LEA's support to governors is very satisfactory. The last inspection reported that, whilst this area of activity was satisfactory overall, there were weaknesses and there was

a recommendation about developing governor recruitment. That recommendation has been addressed and progress has been satisfactory.

101. The LEA has made strenuous efforts to recruit additional governors and its efforts have been rewarded with the vacancy rate falling during the current year despite high turnover. Currently there is a 12.8 per cent vacancy rate for LEA governors, which is only slightly above the national figure. The LEA's efforts have included effective marketing and publicity, use of the community web site, forming links with employers in the area, good links with community groups and surveying governors who are retiring. The LEA's development of its strategy is being informed by all these contacts.

102. Governors are involved in the design of services through a governor development group and meetings with a link governor network. Changes have been made to the delivery of the service as a consequence of feedback through these groups.

103. The LEA provides good information to governors, including a booklet specifically focussed on school improvement, and this is supported by a valued development programme comprising over 40 events with 55 per cent of governors attending at least one during the year. All governing bodies in the authority had at least one member attending at least one event during the year. In addition, over 50 development sessions were arranged for whole governing bodies. The course for new governors attracted 85 per cent of those eligible and there is an attractive welcome pack for new governors as well as a termly governor newsletter. All events are appropriately evaluated.

104. The LEA identifies needs and acts to respond to those in a targeted way that emphasises school autonomy. Governors receive data on school performance and support has been provided on analysing and using this. Governors reported that they receive prompt and helpful advice, in times of crisis, from officers who are seen as accessible and patient. Where appropriate, the LEA has used its power to appoint additional governors.

105. The LEA offers a clerking service on a traded basis. The great majority of schools use and value the service. Governors, and school responses in the survey, were positive about the support they receive. There is a highly satisfactory capacity to improve this service further.

The effectiveness of services to support school management

106. The previous report identified weaknesses in service management. Service plans were considered insubstantial, service specifications lacked standards, mechanisms for evaluation were underdeveloped, and services were fragmented.

107. Support for school management is now satisfactory. The LEA has made progress in several ways. It has created a post of client services officer to co-ordinate services and develop a brokerage role. A comprehensive *Services for Schools* folder has been produced setting out, for each service, key aspects such as price, what schools can expect, performance standards and length of agreements. Schools now rank clarity of service specifications as satisfactory to good. In the longer term, the planned external partnership will cover a full range of management support services and should have the capacity to bring about further improvements. Schools are clear that they have a choice of provider.

108. **Financial support services** were considered satisfactory in the February 2001 report, although they had suffered from loss of key staff and the service specification was judged to be not well-structured. The service remains satisfactory. The final staff vacancies were filled recently and revised service specifications have been produced. Financial management remains sound and schools rate the service overall as satisfactory to good. However, there are some weaknesses. Take up of traded services is low and reducing. Schools perceived the LEA to be slow in offering advice on aspects of budget management such as budget setting.

109. Similarly, **human resources services** to schools were judged satisfactory in the previous inspection, but with weaknesses. There was too little differentiation in the service level agreement with schools, and routine processing of contracts was judged to be inefficient and likely to remain so until a new payroll and personnel system was implemented.

110. The service remains satisfactory, though some weaknesses remain connected with staff vacancies and turnover. A specialist education team within the corporate service is now well established. Schools can now buy in on a 'buy as you use' basis. Over 95 per cent of contracts are processed within the statutory timescale. The payroll has been outsourced at the request of headteachers following consultation. Schools now rate this service as satisfactory. The provision of advice and casework by personnel was rated as satisfactory to good in the school survey, which is less favourable than at the last inspection. Only half the schools now buy back, compared with nearly 90 per cent in 2000/01. The effectiveness of this service is affected by staff vacancies, which are expected to continue until October 2002.

111. Property **services** were previously described as unsatisfactory with significant weaknesses, associated with poor contractor performance and failure of the service to 'grasp the culture of meeting client needs'. However, the service was judged to be capable of improving once new performance standards and monitoring were implemented. There have been improvements, but some weaknesses remain and the service is still unsatisfactory overall. Although schools now rate the management of building projects as satisfactory, the repairs and maintenance service is still considered to be too variable in quality. The in-house provider is seen particularly by secondary headteachers as not giving value for money.

112. In the previous inspection, **services for ICT in school administration** were judged to be poor. The service was considered reactive and performance management underdeveloped. Shortage of technical staff had caused problems. Improvements have now been made and the service is considered satisfactory. In the schools survey, schools reported that technical support was satisfactory. The LEA has provided a range of courses and uptake has been good. The LEA has provided effective support for the implementation of the pupil level annual school census. However, the council's website and intranet are not yet sufficiently developed.

113. Support for cleaning and caretaking, grounds maintenance and catering were not assessed in the previous inspection. Most schools do not buy contract management services from the LEA or use the in-house provider for either **cleaning and caretaking** or **catering**. Evidence from focus groups suggests schools prefer to manage these services directly and welcome the autonomy that local management gives them. Accordingly, no judgment is made on the effectiveness of the LEA in respect of these functions.

114. **Support for grounds maintenance** is satisfactory. The majority of schools use the LEA's service to obtain grounds maintenance contractors. Evidence from focus groups indicates that they are generally satisfied with the arrangements, although there are some exceptions. The LEA provides technical advice and systems are in place for monitoring quality.

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

115. The LEA's work in this area is satisfactory with a number of strengths. An example is the mechanism that has been put in place to recruit newly-qualified teachers to a primary pool.

116. The authority has experienced some difficulties in recruiting teachers, exacerbated by the rapidly rising population and the need to open new schools in areas of new housing. For example, new headteachers were appointed in one in eight schools last year. The LEA has responded effectively to this challenge, devising strategies which have gone a long way towards meeting identified needs. For example, the education department has contributed to arrangements to secure lower-cost housing for key workers including teachers. The authority has a slightly higher percentage of newly qualified teachers in its workforce than is the case nationally. The support programme for these teachers is good and a higher proportion of them are retained for more than one year than is the case nationally.

117. There is a strong professional development programme based on evaluation of need and extensive use is made of external consultants and providers in support of this making good use of grant funding. The LEA actively promotes national and local training opportunities. The development of mentoring for middle managers is a strength. Fewer teachers left the authority last year than is the case nationally. The LEA's efforts to recruit and retain teachers received positive comments from schools in the survey.

118. The authority as a whole has not yet fully developed a corporate response to the identified need to recruit teachers and the progress to date owes more to the efforts of the education department than it does to a more widely co-ordinated strategy. The LEA has a good capacity to improve this function further.

The effectiveness of services to support school improvement

119. The previous inspection judged the effectiveness of services to support school improvement to be satisfactory overall, with some weaknesses. Good progress has been made in this area and it is now highly satisfactory and gives good value for money. Most functions are carried out very well. Rightly, the highest priority is on improving attainment in schools, particularly in those schools where attainment is low or where schools are under performing. An appropriate emphasis is placed on encouraging schools to be self-managing and self-evaluating. Schools are improving, as is pupils' attainment and there is strong evidence to indicate that there have been considerable and demonstrable improvements in those schools which have been the target for support. The LEA has also been effective in raising the standards of achievement of groups of pupils upon which it has been focused. In instances where the service has had insufficient impact, appropriate action has been taken to carry out research into the reasons, as in the case of boys' under-achievement.

120. The standards and effectiveness division provides the main thrust for school improvement, although services are appropriately co-ordinated across the department to support developments. In the main, the service has been successful, although it has, as yet, only just begun to secure improvements in the PRU.

121. The standards and effectiveness division is very well led and managed. Strategic planning is good. Staff are deployed effectively according to service priorities which arise from a thorough analysis of data, feedback from schools and emerging national priorities. Performance management is a strength. It is firmly embedded and is used well to ensure effective service delivery by well-trained staff. Targets set for officers are realistic and the procedures for their induction and training are sound and ensure that staff are equipped with the necessary skills and expertise they need to carry out their tasks. Where vacancies have occurred as a result of staff changes, the LEA has ensured continuity by engaging consultants, often on a temporary basis, to fill the gaps. In many cases, these temporary appointments have led to permanent contracts once the performance and effectiveness of the post holder have been assessed by the LEA.

Section 3: Special Educational Needs

Summary

122. Provision for special educational needs remains unsatisfactory or poor in all aspects, and poor progress has been made since the previous inspection. The LEA is well aware of the problems, which have been mainly caused by difficulties in recruitment and retention of staff. Use of a consultant and support from another LEA only alleviated the problem to a small extent. However there have been a number of recent appointments including the new divisional manager for special education and inclusion and the special needs adviser. All team leaders are in place within the division. There is now good capacity to improve.

Strategy

123. At the time of the previous inspection, the LEA's policy and strategy were ineffectual and there was a lack of leadership. There is still no policy and there has been no thorough review of possible strategies based on a detailed audit. Progress since the last inspection has been poor.

124. More recently, following the new appointments, there has been effective consultation with schools on a repositioning paper concerning support for pupils with special educational needs. This process has re-engaged schools which is aiding the development of a policy for this area of work. The LEA has recently asked schools to carry out an audit of their capacity to support pupils with special educational needs, and of the needs of individual pupils. When complete this should provide the LEA with a clear audit of need and provision.

Recommendations

In order to improve the entitlement for pupils with special educational needs:

- establish a policy on supporting these pupils; and
- develop a strategic action plan, and implement the policy, with realistic targets and milestones.

125. At the time of the last inspection, the expenditure on placing pupils with special needs outside the LEA was double that of other unitary authorities. While the LEA reduced this expenditure in 2000/01, and has plans for further reductions, the redistribution of these resources has not been well communicated to schools, and is not yet part of an overall strategy to improve provision for pupils with special educational needs.

126. The school survey indicates a poor view of the LEA's strategy and planning for special educational needs, a view that is worse than that at the time of the last inspection. Schools have also indicated confidence in the new management arrangements and there is a good capacity to improve.

Statutory obligations

127. The LEA does not meet its statutory obligations satisfactorily and its performance in providing statutory assessments has deteriorated since the last inspection.

128. The proportion of draft statements completed within the recommended 18 weeks is low. At the time of the previous inspection in 1999/2000, 42 per cent of the statements completed met this target, rising to 56 per cent in the April to August 2000 period. The proportion of statements completed within 18 weeks dropped to 48 per cent in 2000/01 mainly as a result of staffing problems. The service is now fully staffed and induction of new staff has been completed. There has been a recent upturn in performance, but even so, a great deal of improvement is required to meet the target of 85 per cent of statements completed that has been set by the LEA for 2002/03.

Recommendation**In order to improve the provision for pupils with special educational needs:**

- the time taken to process and produce statutory assessments should be reduced as a matter of urgency.

129. The parent partnership service has recently appointed a new head of service. The support prior to the appointment, though limited, was well focused and valued by schools.

SEN functions to support school improvement

130. Overall, the support for school improvement remains unsatisfactory. There have been some improvements since the last inspection.

131. Ofsted inspection reports indicate that the proportion of primary schools where pupils with special educational needs make good progress is below the national average and that of similar authorities. Although the evidence base is small, the proportion of secondary schools where pupils with special educational needs make good progress is above average.

132. There has been an increase in the number of children with statements. The percentage of pupils for whom the authority maintains a statement was well above the national average in 2000/01 and is increasing. This is not consistent with the new Code of Practice for special educational needs and is linked to the lack of a clear policy and strategy. The procedures for early identification, intervention and support for pupils with special educational needs are unsatisfactory.

133. The systems for monitoring pupils' progress are insufficiently robust. Casework files are poorly organised as a result of there being insufficient guidance on their content. There is no consistent system of identifying pupils' targets. Annual reviews are conducted by schools, but until this academic year they were insufficiently monitored by the LEA.

*Recommendations***In order to improve the support for the progress made by pupils with special educational needs:**

- clear procedures should be identified and implemented to ensure annual reviews are timely and focused on pupils' progress; and
- effective systems should be put in place for monitoring pupils' progress and for challenging schools on this.

134. The support provided by the education support service is rated by schools as unsatisfactory. The service is not targeted closely enough on priorities or the development of schools' capacity to support pupils with special educational needs. The survey indicates that schools rate the support by the education psychology service across both phases of education as satisfactory. The service provided is flexible and clearly focused on meeting the needs of schools. The service is well led and managed although currently there are staff vacancies. There is a clear commitment to early intervention and the service works effectively with other agencies and is involved in key initiatives such as 'Sure Start'.

135. The LEA has provided guidance and a handbook for schools that have been found useful, although they are not sufficiently aligned with the new special educational needs Code of Practice.

136. Accredited courses for teacher assistants and special educational needs co-ordinators are effectively targeted and well received by schools. There is currently no co-ordinated approach to out-reach work or the dissemination of good practice.

137. Schools rate the LEA's support for helping schools to develop their capacity to meet the needs of pupils with special educational needs as poor and significantly worse than at the time of the last inspection. Although schools have noted recent improvements these have yet to have an impact.

Value for money

138. Services to support special educational needs provide poor value for money, as they did at the time of the previous inspection.

139. Effective systems are now in place for monitoring centrally-retained budgets, although this process is not transparent to schools. Similarly, schools have limited understanding of the basis on which resources for special educational needs are delegated to them. There are no consistent systems for monitoring the way delegated resources are used to meet children's needs, nor to link this with pupils' progress. The relative roles of the schools and the LEA in this process are unclear. There are no secure systems whereby the LEA can assess value for money in relation to the progress made by pupils.

Recommendations**In order to improve the value for money of provision for special educational needs:**

- the basis for and allocation of centrally-held and delegated budgets should be made transparent to schools;
- resource use should be monitored and linked to pupils' progress; and
- the respective roles of the LEA and schools should be clearly defined.

Section 4: Promoting social inclusion

The strategy to promote social inclusion

140. In the last inspection a number of the elements impacting upon the education department's overall approach to promoting social inclusion were deemed to be unsatisfactory. There has been sound improvement since that time and the education department's work in this area is now satisfactory overall, albeit still with a weakness in support for looked after children.

141. The new administration accords the promotion of social inclusion a high priority. The education department has responded positively to this aspiration, in particular developing a way of working which has involved drawing people together, from different groups within the department, in fluid teams to address specific social inclusion issues in a coherent way. One very positive outcome of this approach has been the creation of some good quality advice for schools on dealing with pupil mobility.

142. With the exception of the contribution of the youth and leisure services from the community and economic development department, the impact of the council's commitment to promoting social inclusion is less evident at the wider directorate level. Strategic links between education and children's services are often effective, but this can be attributed to the efforts of those two heads of service. Impact is even less evident at a more corporate level, where, for example, the social inclusion working group has yet to achieve much in terms of practical action to promote inclusion.

143. The education department has put appropriate arrangements in place to monitor the achievement of vulnerable groups of pupils, particularly those from ethnic minorities and those in public care and there are well targeted programmes of action to address the issues identified. While the progress of children in these groups is variable when compared with national data, the LEA is well aware of the data and has a thorough understanding of the issues involved.

144. There are sensible arrangements in place to secure strategic coherence between the work of education, children's services and the police. Some schools, however, perceive that at the operational level there is less co-ordination between, for example, children's services and education. Strategic and operational links between health and education are not effective enough although there have been some recent improvements.

The supply of school places

145. This area was judged to be satisfactory in the previous inspection, although there were weaknesses relating to raising standards and in making efficient use of resources. Of specific concern was the high proportion of surplus places, especially in primary schools. At the time, 17 primary and three secondary schools – a fifth of those in the LEA - had more than 25 per cent places unfilled. Although considerable progress has been made on aspects of planning school places, this area is now unsatisfactory overall because of the LEA's continued failure to achieve value for money by removing surplus places.

146. School place planning in Milton Keynes is very difficult for the LEA. The overall situation is volatile and it is hard to predict where growth will occur. Each year since 2000, 1,500 new homes have been built. Population in some parts of the LEA, particularly the east and west flanks of the city, continues to grow at a rate which outstrips the supply of school places. To deal with this growth, the LEA is undertaking a highly ambitious school building programme. Five new primary and two new secondary schools have been opened since 1997. There are plans to open a further seven primary schools and two secondary schools by 2006. A Basic Need bid of £36m was submitted to the DfES in September 2002 to fund this programme.

147. In contrast, some planning areas outside the city centre retain high numbers of surplus places. At the time of inspection, based on the previously used measure of capacity, the number of primary schools with more than 25 per cent unfilled places had risen from 17 to 23. When the new 'net capacity' measure is applied, there remain 15 primary schools with more than 25 per cent surplus places (excluding rural first schools). This represents more than 1500 unfilled places. Insufficient action has been taken to remove surplus places in some planning areas where there is limited population growth. Targeted action is taking place to remove surplus places from two secondary schools in parts of the LEA where they are not needed.

148. After an unsuccessful attempt to remove surplus places from the system in 2000/01, the LEA has now developed a new strategy about which it is currently consulting stakeholders. In order to raise standards at all key stages and make better use of its building stock, the LEA is proposing to change the age of transfer from 12 to 11. The LEA has a clear vision of what it is trying to achieve by linking planning for school places to school improvement. This is underlined in the school organisation plan. The strategy is well thought out and offers the opportunity of real improvements, provided that the opportunity is taken to deal with surplus places as part of a coordinated approach. The LEA now has precise knowledge of the capacity and suitability of each of its schools which will allow better informed decisions to be made.

Recommendation

In order to make the best of resources:

- once a decision has been made about the age of transfer, swift action should be taken to remove surplus places.

149. The School Organisation Committee is now operating effectively and in an appropriately independent manner.

150. The infant class size pledge has now been achieved. By September 2002, no class had more than the target 30 pupils.

Admissions

151. Performance in this area was previously judged satisfactory, but with some weaknesses. At the time of the previous inspection the proportion of pupils gaining their first preferences for secondary places had fallen to 92 per cent and the number of appeals had

increased. This was attributed to a shortage of places in particular areas, parental preference for certain schools, the age of secondary transfer and pupil mobility.

152. Admissions are still undertaken satisfactorily by the LEA. In September 2002, 94 per cent of pupils were offered places in their first preference secondary school. Nevertheless, there is still extreme pressure on two oversubscribed secondary schools in areas of high population growth. Some schools in other parts of the LEA remain undersubscribed by up to 40 places. This situation causes concern among parents and headteachers.

153. Following consultation, the LEA has changed the date of primary admissions to a single point of entry for four year olds. This is part of a strategy to raise standards at Key Stage 1 by giving all children the same length of experience in primary school. Between 96 and 97 per cent of four-year olds are estimated to have been placed at their first preference school in September 2002. No pupil aged four is currently without a school place.

154. The number of primary and secondary appeals reduced slightly between 2000/01 and 2001/02, and only half as many were upheld. In 2002, almost 90 per cent of all appeals were dealt with in a timely fashion before the end of the Summer term. The rest, which were virtually all new arrivals, were heard in the holidays or the first week of term.

Asset management

155. The February 2001 report noted that the LEA's Asset Management Plan (AMP) had focused insufficiently on tackling the maintenance backlog. The relative roles of the schools and the LEA were not clear. Schools did not know how to access advice and guidance. Communications were unclear. The process of identifying priorities for investment was not perceived as open and transparent. All these issues have now been addressed and the LEA's performance in this area is now good.

156. The DfES has approved the AMP and rated it above average. DfES deadlines for condition surveys were met for all schools. The LEA has used New Deal for Schools funding in a targeted way to eliminate all the highest priority items in the maintenance backlog. The total value of the remaining backlog is currently slightly above the national average at £892 per pupil but an action plan is in place to reduce this to £524 by the end of 2002/03.

157. The relative roles of the LEA and schools have been made clear and repairs and maintenance are now included in the delegated budget. Devolved Capital Funding is well-managed and guidance to schools is clear. Spending is monitored by the LEA. The LEA encourages schools to apply for Seed Challenge funding. Procedures are in place to ensure that schools link their asset management priorities to school improvement plan priorities. Evidence from the school survey and focus groups indicates that most schools now consider the prioritisation process for investment to be transparent and honest.

158. The LEA's new *Asset Management Planning Guide for Headteachers and Governors* is particularly good. This explains the key areas in an accessible way: who does what; how priorities are determined; funding arrangements; and practical aspects of property management.

Provision of education for pupils who have no school place

159. The LEA's support for pupils who are educated other than at schools is satisfactory and there has been sound progress since the last inspection when it was unsatisfactory. At that time there was a lack of clear strategic direction with ineffective monitoring and evaluation of provision.

160. The LEA provides effective alternative education for pupils in years 10 and 11 who have been excluded or are at risk of exclusion. The secondary schools contribute £150,000 annually to support the programme of alternative education. There is a clear service level agreement with each alternative education provider and an agreed framework for monitoring and evaluation. At the time of the last inspection not all pupils in alternative education had access to accredited courses at 16 plus. This has now been rectified. The education otherwise than at school service works with the school improvement division effectively. They evaluate the quality of provision and monitor the implementation of improvement plans.

161. Pupils entering the PRU have a defined exit strategy for re-integration into mainstream school or alternative education. All services are contracted to deliver the statutory 25 hours for pupils. This is monitored effectively by the LEA.

162. The range of provision for primary-age pupils and those in Key Stage 3 is regarded by schools as limited. However, these pupils receive 25 hours provision either from the tuition service or in a registered centre.

163. Excluded pupils and pupils at risk of exclusion are referred to the alternative education panel for secondary pupils and the primary panel for primary pupils. These referral systems are well understood by schools. Pupils are registered on a database. The system is used effectively to track pupils' progress and to monitor their attendance.

164. There are clear procedures to identify pupils who live in the authority but have never been to a Milton Keynes school and are at risk of becoming lost to education. There are regular meetings with other agencies such as the police and children's services.

165. A school improvement adviser provides support and monitors the suitability of education plans for parents who educate their children at home. Parents are provided with helpful guidance. The LEA makes appropriate provision for schoolgirl mothers through the tuition service. Satisfactory support for pupils in hospital is provided either by the tuition service or purchased from outside the LEA.

Attendance

166. The LEA's support for improving attendance is satisfactory. There has been sound progress since the previous inspection when it was satisfactory overall but, too variable because of staffing difficulties. There was no attendance policy and no clear, practical guidance to school. There is now a satisfactory policy and guidance for schools. The Education Development Plan and behaviour support plan link effectively to the attendance policy.

167. Overall primary attendance is in line with the national average and is improving at a faster rate than is found nationally. Secondary attendance is in line with the national average and is improving at the same rate as nationally. The LEA met its target for 2001/02 for reducing unauthorised absence in the secondary sector and narrowly missed the primary target.

168. The Education Development Plan commits the LEA to reducing both authorised and unauthorised absence. Effective structures are in place for liaison across services within the education department. The work of the education welfare service is well linked to the Excellence Cluster initiatives, LPSA targets for schools facing challenging circumstances and work with the police on initiatives such as truancy watch. Education welfare officers provide particular support for vulnerable groups of pupils.

169. The survey indicates that schools rate the effectiveness of the LEA's support for attendance to be less than satisfactory in the secondary sector and barely satisfactory in the primary sector. Compared with the school survey at the time of the previous inspection, there is now a slight improvement in schools' view of the effectiveness of the service. Focus groups indicate grounds for optimism. The newly appointed head of service has a clear grasp of individual school performance and what needs to be done. The LEA has now started to refocus the service so that time is allocated according to the need of the school.

Behaviour support

170. The LEA's support for improving behaviour is satisfactory and there has been sound progress since the previous inspection when it was poor. There was no LEA policy and there was a lack of leadership.

171. The LEA has developed a behaviour support plan with a clear rationale, following sound consultation with schools. The effectiveness of the plan has been reviewed. However some evaluations are insufficiently linked to the overall objectives of the plan and specific success criteria.

172. In 1999/2000 the LEA was close to achieving its target for reducing the numbers of permanently excluded pupils. In 2000/01 only 22 pupils were permanently excluded and the target was exceeded. However, there has been a rise in exclusions in 2001/02 to 47 and the target has not been met.

173. A new head of service has been appointed and the support provided by the behaviour support team is satisfactory. It was created in September 2001 focusing on support for the primary sector. The team aims to enhance schools' capacity to manage behaviour through training and working alongside staff in classrooms. The funding to support behaviour in the secondary sector is delegated directly to schools; use of this funding is monitored by the LEA. The service links effectively with the school improvement team and was involved in the training of learning mentors. The LEA's analysis of recent Ofsted inspection reports of primary schools indicate that attitudes, behaviour and personal development are satisfactory or better in all schools inspected since September 2001 and good or better in over 80 per cent. The survey indicates that primary schools rate support for behaviour as satisfactory and in the top 25 per cent of LEAs in the country.

Health, safety, welfare and child protection

174. The LEA's support for health, safety, welfare and child protection is satisfactory with a number of good features. This area was satisfactory at the time of the previous inspection. Satisfactory progress has been made since that time. The LEA continues to meet all its statutory obligations and participates appropriately in the area child protection committee.

175. Good joint strategic arrangements for child protection exist, advice is clear, and well-designed and informative policies have been produced. The information provided to, and multi-agency training provided for, schools and social workers are also both good. Designated teachers for child protection have been identified in all schools and the LEA monitors the take-up of training and responds well to both emerging and continuing training needs.

176. Children on the child protection register are monitored appropriately and the number of such cases has reduced. At the operational level links between schools and social workers from children's services are still too variable.

177. The LEA has suitable policies in place for health and safety and appropriate arrangements exist to provide schools with advice on areas of risk, and risk assessment. The LEA has a satisfactory capacity to improve this function further.

Looked after children

178. In the last inspection, the LEA's work to support looked after children was judged to be unsatisfactory. This remains the case; although significant improvements have been made in many areas progress overall in this function has been unsatisfactory.

179. The LEA has made improvements in a number of aspects of support for these children. For example, provision for looked after children is prioritised in the Education Development Plan; all schools now have a designated teacher to support looked after children; there has been an appropriate training programme for these teachers; there are agreed procedures and protocols between education and children's services and comprehensive data are collected on a regular basis and entered into a spreadsheet which is up-to-date and shared between children's services and education. An officer appointed jointly between the two departments oversees these arrangements. Schools receive timely information when children in the care of Milton Keynes council are admitted. All such children have a named social worker and schools know who this is. However, the education of children in a Milton Keynes school who are in the care of other authorities is seen by some schools as more problematic, even though there are protocols which provide for liaison between authorities in these cases.

180. The result of these arrangements is fewer looked after children being permanently excluded than is the case nationally, and children in Year 6 who are in public care performing above the national average in English for such children.

181. However, performance at GCSE compares less well, and the school survey shows that schools are less satisfied with support for looked after children than was the case at the time of the last inspection.

182. The Quality Protects management plan is well constructed and appropriately integrated with other strategic plans although the action plan for 2002/03 makes no reference to securing personal education plans for all children. Elected members receive reports on the achievements of looked after children but these are subject to little scrutiny. The way that elected members fulfill their role as corporate parents is not sufficiently clear.

183. At the time of the inspection only one in three of looked after children had a personal education plan. This figure is too low. While the council has plans to improve on this position over the next six or seven months, this constitutes a significant weakness. The council has a satisfactory capacity to improve its support in this area.

Recommendations

In order to improve provision for looked after children:

- urgent steps should be taken to ensure that all such children have a personal education plan; and
- the arrangements by which elected members fulfill their role as corporate parents should be clarified.

Measures to combat racism

184. The previous inspection reported that there had been virtually no support to schools from the LEA, which had failed to get to grips with this issue. Progress has been made and provision is now satisfactory. That inspection recommended that the LEA must urgently put in place a policy, and guidance for schools, in response to the *Report on the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence* (MacPherson report). This has been done satisfactorily.

185. The LEA has accepted the recommendations of the MacPherson report and, for example, all schools are now reporting on racist incidents; a 100 per cent response was achieved in the summer term 2002. Incidents reported by schools are dealt with suitably. They are analysed by the education department and targeted action to address issues identified by these summary statistics is starting to emerge although there is as yet only limited evidence of a positive impact from such intervention. The number of reported racist incidents in the community is rising. Whilst the council, and representatives of the ethnic minority communities, believe that this may have a lot to do with higher reporting levels, there is also a view that racial tension is rising, associated with increasing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers joining the community.

186. The LEA has constructed a policy on racist incidents and is encouraging schools to produce their own using guidance, which it supplies. The LEA has offered appropriate training programmes on this. Data on attainment are analysed by ethnicity and are used to target support and intervention. There has been some work on developing curricular materials to help combat racism, for example in history.

187. The council adopted the Council for Racial Equality standards in 1997 when an audit identified it was, broadly, at level 2. The council believes it is still at this level, which indicates a lack of progress by the council in measures to address racism. It has a slightly lower percentage of its workforce from ethnic minorities than are represented in the total community. Since the election in May, the council has restated its commitment to combating racism.

188. Ethnic minority communities are consulted on racism issues, but representatives spoken to as part of this inspection, while supportive of the planning and policy development that has taken place, were somewhat impatient with progress made on implementing action at a grass roots level. The LEA has a satisfactory capacity to improve this function further.

Section 5: Corporate issues

Summary

189. There were weaknesses in most aspects of this area at the time of the previous inspection. Improvements have been made and provision is now satisfactory. There are improved procedures for implementing and monitoring plans. The new administration is providing satisfactory leadership for education, although scrutiny remains a weakness. Leadership by senior officers has improved, with the newly-formed education department providing a good focus for educational developments. However, there is concern that, given the national and local emphasis placed on education, the education department is only third tier within the authority. This limits full ownership of education's priorities by the council as a whole, and limits the participation of senior officers in the education department in wider corporate initiatives.

Corporate planning

190. Corporate planning for education is satisfactory as are procedures for implementing and evaluating plans. In the previous inspection, while corporate planning was judged to be sound, procedures for implementing and evaluating plans were poor with several weaknesses identified.

191. The council has clear objectives and priorities overall, which are set out in the Best Value performance plan, and are supported by the results of audit and public consultation. One of the objectives is to “enable personal development and enrichment”. The two priorities which concern education, “improve standards in schools” and “improving support for children and young people with special educational needs”, are linked to this. The new administration is in the process of reviewing priorities, but has a clear commitment to maintain education as a priority. A new community plan is being drawn up which builds on the existing community partnership plan. Education is to be included as a priority.

192. The two education priorities are for the most part reflected well in the education department's and other relevant plans such as the children's services plan, although the ICT plan is insufficiently focused on raising attainment. Plans are in general sound, with some good examples such as the Asset Management Plan, and the Education Development Plan. There is no directorate plan.

193. The extent to which actions across the council's directorates are inter-related to support education priorities is under-developed. The new school building programme is supported by the environment directorate and although the issues of pupil mobility and social inclusion have been discussed by cross-directorate groups, specific actions within other directorates have not yet been agreed. Planning links between education and children's services are reasonably well in place.

194. Monitoring has improved since the previous inspection. The council now has procedures in place for regular monitoring of key performance indicators. This is a recent development. Within education, the chief education officer reviews monitoring information

with the department's senior management group and team leaders on a monthly basis. Weekly meetings with divisional managers, supplemented where necessary by meetings with individuals, are held to follow up areas of concern.

195. Performance management is well embedded in the education department. The department has a service plan and all teams have team plans. All staff have appraisals and within the standards and effectiveness division all individuals have objectives that are linked to specific objectives in the Education Development Plan. This is a particularly good feature. These systems provide the chief education officer with a mechanism for ensuring that plans are implemented effectively; in the main this is working well. The problems in special educational needs, which have resulted from difficulties in recruiting staff, are well known and are being tackled. Monitoring has resulted in modifications being made in other areas, for example to the behaviour support strategy. However, exceptionally, shortcomings in support for ICT in the curriculum, and in devising personal education plans for looked after children, had not been identified and acted on by senior management. Progress since the previous inspection is satisfactory, and the education department has the capacity to bring about further improvements.

196. The education department has a clear view of its own strengths and weaknesses; the chief education officer's self-evaluation statement, drawn up in advance of this inspection, was concise, perceptive and largely confirmed by the inspection.

Decision making

197. Decision making was judged to be unsatisfactory at the time of the previous inspection, but has improved and is now satisfactory. The council has changed its structure and has been operating a cabinet and scrutiny committee system since September 2001. The cabinet takes decisions in a manner which is accountable and transparent. The forward plan contains details of key decisions and dates when they will be taken and is published as required. The cabinet has recently taken a timely decision to go ahead with a programme to build new primary schools. Previous proposals for removing surplus places were not thought through well enough and met with difficulties during consultation. The council did not take decisions to remove places. However, lessons were learnt from this, and proposals on the new school system review, which focus on the principle of whether the age of transfer should be changed, are out to consultation. The LEA has clear reasons for retaining central control of some items of expenditure but, despite consultation, the reasons are not always well understood by schools.

The leadership provided by officers and elected members

198. While the current administration has been in place only since the elections held last May, early indications are that the leadership for education provided by them is satisfactory. The leadership provided by senior officers is satisfactory with some good features. Both these areas were judged to be unsatisfactory at the time of the previous inspection, with several key weaknesses identified.

199. Over the last two years, members have increased spending on education which they are now funding at the level of the education Standard Spending Assessment. Education has

an appropriate emphasis within the council's overall priorities, and members have stated their commitment to maintain it as a priority. Progress has been made on the new schools' building programme and the expansion of nursery education.

200. Cabinet members with responsibility for education demonstrate a knowledge of and interest in educational issues. They appreciate the need to keep a focus on key strategic issues and profess themselves willing to take difficult decisions if necessary. The education forum, which has cross-party membership, and whose terms of reference include consultation with headteachers and governors, was set up in April. It has a monitoring function and receives information on education, including details of school standards and schools causing concern. It also acts as an advisory group for the portfolio holder. Members have used this group to question officers about progress but are not yet being proactive in requesting specific information that they need in order to monitor progress effectively. The LEA's post-inspection action plan has also been monitored by a working group of elected members. However, scrutiny in education is weak. No in-depth scrutinies of education have taken place. The relevant scrutiny committee has not sufficiently clarified its purpose or how to go about its business. So far it has received insufficient support from officers concerning this. There are early signs of progress in that the committee is to agree a list of topics for scrutiny and is to discuss how to proceed.

Recommendation

In order to improve scrutiny:

- advice and support for members of the learning, community and economic development overview committee should be secured in how to carry out rigorous scrutiny of education and the work of the LEA.

201. In the survey just prior to the May elections, schools rated the effectiveness of leadership by elected members to be poor and significantly below average. Headteachers in focus groups felt there were now more grounds for optimism.

202. The leadership provided by senior officers has improved since the previous inspection. The creation of a single education department, with the head of department as the designated chief education officer, has enabled a much sharper focus on educational issues. The chief education officer was newly appointed at the time of the previous inspection. Together with other long-serving senior officers, he has driven forward improvements in a large number of areas. However, progress has been hindered particularly by difficulties in recruiting an officer to lead the special education and inclusion division. A head of division who commands widespread respect took up post in September and there is now much more confidence that improvements can be made in this area.

203. The department has two other vacancies at the level of head of division. Satisfactory temporary measures are in place to cover these posts internally, and they will be advertised once the inspection is over. However, the chief education officer has had to be more involved in managing divisions than would usually be the case. This has detracted from the time available to articulate the department's vision to schools, although he has continued to visit schools and attend meetings of headteachers. The balance needs to be redressed once all vacancies are filled.

204. Education is a third-tier department, within the wider directorate of learning and development. This does not reflect the high priority placed on education or accord it sufficient status within the council. The chief education officer is not a member of the chief officers' board. He is invited to attend meetings where education is to be a particular focus and has also recently become the education representative on the cross-council social inclusion working group. However he is not automatically party to all discussions at chief-officer level where there might be an educational case to be made. The structure also means that divisional managers in the education department, who would be at third-tier level in most councils, are fourth tier in Milton Keynes. This may have contributed to the difficulties experienced in recruiting divisional managers.

205. The education department is represented at the chief officers' board by the strategic director. The strategic director, who has only been in post for five months, has embarked on a programme of visits to schools which they appreciate, and which is positively affecting relationships. Apart from this, and the contribution of the youth and leisure services, the inspection did not identify any value added to the education department by being part of the wider directorate of learning and development. The present directorate structure was set up in order to achieve synergy in all services for children. However, this has not yet been achieved, partly because of the weaknesses in special educational needs. Also the onus on making links with children's services is clearly placed with the chief education officer. It is not clear whether the structure and/or the way it operates is the most suitable for achieving the council's educational priorities.

Recommendation

In order to improve council-wide support for education and draw more effectively on the strengths of the education department at corporate level:

- the present structure and how it works, including the effectiveness and efficiency of the positioning of the education department within the learning and development directorate, should be evaluated. This process should take into account the views of schools and other partners.

206. In general senior officers give elected members sound advice. The portfolio holder for schools and the opposition spokespersons both receive weekly briefing, and members outside the two main parties have access to briefings. However, officers have not secured for members sufficient training, advice and guidance on how to carry out effective scrutiny.

207. Communication with schools has improved and is now satisfactory. A joint working group with headteachers was set up to tackle problems. A communications officer has been appointed and a suitable code of practice on LEA - school communication recently produced. A good quality regular management briefing for headteachers has been introduced. A system of meetings and conferences for headteachers and chairs of governors is in place which is largely effective. However, some primary headteachers expressed a desire for more debate as meetings to date had necessarily focused on imparting information. In its relationship with schools the LEA is appropriately supporting school autonomy.

208. Schools in the survey rated leadership by senior officers between satisfactory and good. This was confirmed by headteachers in the focus groups. Progress in this area since

the last inspection has been sound, and the capacity for further improvement is good, especially since filling the crucial post of manager for the special education and inclusion division.

Partnership

209. Partnership with other agencies is satisfactory, with some strengths. At the time of the previous inspection partnership with external agencies was judged to be very good. However, liaison with children's services was limited.

210. The education department has established a range of successful projects with other agencies, which depending on the state of development of the project, are starting to have a positive impact on participating schools. These include the safer schools initiative with the police, the healthy schools programme with the health trust, the primary schools learning network with the University of Nottingham, and a partnership with the NSPCC which places counsellors in 12 primary schools.

211. Partnerships with the diocesan representatives, and the standing advisory council for religious education (SACRE) are effective. The SACRE is well supported by the LEA and carries out its statutory duties. The education department contributes appropriately to the bodies such as the area child protection committee, the drug reference group, the youth offending team steering group and the Early Years Development and Child Care Partnership.

212. The education department has a reasonably strategic approach to these partnerships. In the absence of an overall strategy officers are able to demonstrate how current partnerships support the council's corporate objectives and link with the Education Development Plan.

213. The Local Strategic Partnership builds on a strong history of local partnership working including with a range of voluntary and other agencies. It is at an early stage of development and only held its first meeting in June. Organisation such as the council, and strategic partnerships such as Connexions and the crime and safety partnership are represented. However, the Learning and Skills Council is not a member, being represented by the lifelong learning partnership. This omission is surprising, given that Milton Keynes has a low staying on rate into education by 16 years olds. The Connexions partnership, which is managed by one of the local secondary schools, is working effectively. It is supported by the youth service and by a senior education manager from within the learning and development directorate.

214. Links between education and health have been difficult in the past. These are being strengthened through the children and young people's planning group, which includes education, children's services and health. A primary mental health worker has been appointed jointly by education and health in order to reduce the number of pupils who have been referred and are waiting for an appointment. However the continuing lack of a clear strategic plan for special educational needs still makes it difficult for health to take into account education's needs in its forward planning.

215. There are good links at head of department and senior manager level between education and children's services. Good working links also exist between officers from the two departments concerned with particular groups of children, for example, the team for

looked after children. The effectiveness of links between schools and individual social workers continues to be too variable.

216. Schools in the school survey rated partnership working with other council department and external agencies to be unsatisfactory and significantly lower than average. There have been some improvements since the previous inspection and the LEA has the capacity for further improvement.

Appendix: Recommendations

The report makes a number of recommendations.

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

In order to improve the entitlement for pupils with special educational needs:

- establish a policy on supporting these pupils; and
- develop a strategic action plan, and implement the policy, with realistic targets and milestones.

In order to improve the provision for pupils with special educational needs:

- the time taken to process and produce statutory assessments should be reduced as a matter of urgency.

In order to improve the support for the progress made by pupils with special educational needs:

- clear procedures should be identified and implemented to ensure annual reviews are timely and focused on pupils' progress; and
- effective systems should be out in place for monitoring pupils' progress, and for challenging schools on this.

In order to improve the value for money of provision for special educational needs:

- the basis for and allocation of centrally-held and delegated budgets should be made transparent to schools;
- resource use should be monitored and linked to pupils' progress; and
- the respective roles of the LEA and schools should be clearly defined.

In order to improve provision for looked after children:

- urgent steps should be taken to ensure that all such children have a personal education plan; and
- the arrangements by which elected members fulfill their role as corporate parents should be clarified.

We also make the following recommendations:

In order to make the best use of available resources:

- procedures should be strengthened for working with schools to identify and reduce inappropriate or unplanned budget surpluses.
-

In order to raise the expectations of schools, and to challenge them and its school improvement service further:

- the LEA should use data from those authorities defined by Ofsted as statistical neighbours against which to compare its own performance.

In order to improve support to schools for ICT in the curriculum:

- intervention and support should be focused on work in the classroom to bring about direct improvement in children's learning in ICT;
- provision of advice and support to schools should be secured to enable teachers to assess and level pupils' work confidently and accurately; and
- in agreement with primary schools individual pupils' data should be collected from primary schools.

In order to keep EMASS staff informed fully about the experiences of minority ethnic and Traveller pupils so that they can help improve their attainment:

- procedures should be established which ensure that EMASS staff are involved in discussion on pupils who have been excluded or are at risk of exclusion.

In order to make the best of resources:

- once a decision has been made about the age of transfer, swift action should be taken to remove surplus places.

In order to improve scrutiny:

- advice and support for members of the learning, community and economic development overview committee should be secured in how to carry out rigorous scrutiny of education and the work of the LEA.

In order to improve council-wide support for education and draw more effectively on the strengths of the education department at corporate level:

- the present structure and how it works, including the effectiveness and efficiency of the positioning of the education department within the learning and development directorate, should be evaluated. This process should take into account the views of schools and other partners.