



OFFICE FOR STANDARDS
IN EDUCATION

**INSPECTION OF
WALSALL
LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

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**OFFICE OF HER MAJESTY'S CHIEF INSPECTOR OF SCHOOLS
in conjunction with the
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APPENDIX 1: RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection of Walsall 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. The previous inspection of the LEA took place in December 1999.

2. The inspection was based on a range of material, which included self-evaluation undertaken by the LEA, and data, some of which was provided by the LEA. That material also included school inspection information; HMI monitoring reports and audit reports; documentation from, and discussions with, LEA officers and members; focus groups of headteachers and governors; staff in other departments at that local authority; and diocesan representatives. Other agencies and partners also participated in focus groups. In addition, the inspection team considered the earlier OFSTED/Audit Commission report on this LEA published in December 1999. A questionnaire, seeking views on aspects of the work of the LEA, was circulated to all 129 schools, and its results were considered by the inspection team. The response rate to the questionnaire was 65 per cent.

3. The inspection also involved studies of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to four primary schools and two secondary schools. Those visits tested the views of governors, headteachers and other staff on key aspects of the LEA's strategy. The visits also considered whether the support that is provided by the LEA and the contractor contributes, where appropriate, to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, and is effective in contributing to improvements in the school and provides value for money.

COMMENTARY

4. Walsall is a diverse urban area and continues to be characterised by some neighbourhoods of intense deprivation. Standards in schools remain below the national averages in all key stages but have, until 2001, generally risen in line with or above the trend nationally. The LEA acknowledges that standards need to rise faster, particularly at Key Stage 3 where English results are well below the national average. The gap between current performance and Key Stage 2 targets remains large and it is unlikely that the LEA will achieve its target for English.

5. At the time of the previous inspection in 1999, the LEA was well behind the pace of developments and was failing to discharge two general responsibilities: to exercise its functions with a view to raising standards and to use resources efficiently. While the LEA had some strengths, the list of weaknesses was formidable.

6. The first twelve months following the inspection was a period of considerable uncertainty and included a complete change in senior staff. Since then, intervention by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills has resulted in further major structural, organisational and staff changes. A procurement process to appoint a contractor was initiated following a direction by the Secretary of State and in July 2001, SercoQAA was appointed as the contractor to strengthen key areas of the LEA's services. The interim management arrangements and the appointment of the new director of education ensured the effective negotiation of these outsourcing arrangements. However, this interim management was not sufficient to maintain some of the LEA's functions or to ensure the progress required in some of the key services. Progress overall since the inspection has been poor and the performance of some LEA functions has deteriorated.

7. The education directorate has been restructured. It has been successful in re-building relationships with schools and in establishing more effective structures for consultation. Senior officers have worked hard to create a culture in which school improvement is the focus for all services within the directorate, and have met with some success. Schools recognise and welcome these changes but believe, rightly, that it is still early days. Since the contractor took responsibility for school improvement and associated strategic management functions, rapid progress has been made in restructuring and re-defining the services to support schools, and in the quality of service delivery.

8. However, these improvements are fragile, in view of the weaknesses at the corporate centre. Elected members offer limited strategic direction and do not play a key role in monitoring performance. While the importance of education to the wider regeneration agenda of the borough is recognised by the council, important educational objectives are not fully reflected in corporate planning and action. Spending within the education budget does not reflect strategic priorities, and strategies to promote continuous improvement are currently unsatisfactory. The potential contribution of other council departments and partners is not fully realised and as a result, schools are not receiving the benefits of integrated action. In short, the LEA is still not exercising all its relevant functions effectively in order to raise standards in schools.

9. In particular, the LEA is failing to provide effective support for the most vulnerable individuals and groups, including pupils with special educational needs (SEN). Despite clear recommendations made at the last inspection, the LEA still does not have an agreed strategy for SEN and the implementation of the Code of Practice is very poor. The LEA has not made the expected progress on its strategy to promote social inclusion and is well behind the government's agenda. Aspects of current provision are very poor and the LEA's capacity to improve is uncertain.

10. The overall performance of the LEA remains very poor. However, the following are good:

- support for curriculum use of information and communication technology;
- school admissions; and
- the music support service.

The following have improved and are now satisfactory:

- the extent to which the LEA has defined monitoring, challenge and intervention;
- support for governors;
- support for minority ethnic pupils, including Travellers; and
- property services, grounds maintenance and cleaning and caretaking.

11. The following functions are performed inadequately, including some instances where provision is poor or very poor:

- implementation of the EDP;
- the allocation of resources to priorities;
- strategy to promote continuous improvement, including Best Value;
- the monitoring and challenging of schools, including the use of performance data;
- the identification and intervention in under-performing schools;
- the management and effectiveness of services to support school improvement;
- support for Key Stage 3 and for gifted and talented pupils;
- support for school leadership and management;
- effectiveness of services to support school management, including personnel;
- the strategy and provision for SEN, including value for money;
- strategy for promoting social inclusion;
- support for pupils with no school place;
- support for attendance and behaviour;
- child protection and support for children in public care;
- corporate planning processes and implementation;
- decision making and the leadership of elected members; and
- the leadership of senior officers.

12. Within the school improvement function, the impact of the contractor is beginning to be felt. It is too soon to judge the impact on school performance, but the prospects for improvement are good. However, it is the promotion of social inclusion and the associated services, some of which are retained by the LEA, that are of most

concern. Currently, the LEA's overall capacity and capability for further improvement are poor for the following reasons:

- the poor leadership of elected members;
- the insufficient pace and record of improvement to date;
- the newness of the membership of the senior management team and, as a team, the lack of an established pattern and track record of strategic management; and
- the lack of embedded, consistent and confident budget management, planning and evaluation of services.

13. Future progress is dependent upon the extensive package of support now in place, following the recent corporate governance inspection. It will also be necessary for OFSTED to establish a programme of frequent monitoring to check whether sufficient progress is being made.

SECTION 1: LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

14. The Metropolitan Borough of Walsall is a diverse urban area, including areas of intense deprivation. Forty-five per cent of the population live in wards that are in the ten per cent most deprived in England. Walsall ranks as the 31st most deprived local authority area according to the national indices of multiple deprivation. There has been a reduction in unemployment, but at 4.6 per cent, it remains above the national average.

15. The total pupil population is a little over 50,400. Some 18.1 per cent of pupils are of minority ethnic origin compared with about 12 per cent nationally. The largest minority groups are Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi. The proportion of pupils entitled to a free school meal has declined since the first inspection; from 23.2 to 20.7 per cent in primary schools and from 19.5 to 17.8 per cent in secondary schools. Both figures are broadly in line with the national averages.

16. Through its extensive provision of early years education, the LEA guarantees every three year-old at least a part-time place. There are eight nursery schools, seven special schools, 94 primary (75 of which have nursery classes) and 20 secondary schools (of which seven are foundation, including two grammar schools). The popularity of schools, particularly secondary schools, varies widely with some being heavily over-subscribed. There are two pupil referral units (PRUs) for secondary aged pupils which between them have 16 places for school phobic and pregnant pupils. One nursery school and a special school have Beacon status and three secondary schools have specialist school status.

17. The proportion of primary-aged pupils with statements of special educational need (SEN) is lower than is the case nationally, and the proportion of those pupils who attend special schools is in line with the national average. These proportions are in line with national averages for secondary-aged pupils. The percentage of 16-year-olds continuing in full-time education has risen in recent years but at 69 per cent in 2000, was below the national average.

18. Following the previous LEA inspection, ministers and senior elected members agreed in May 2000, to establish a private sector strategic partnership for school improvement and associated strategic management functions. The services of a contractor were obtained from July 2001 under a direction of the Secretary of State for Education and Skills. Under the terms of the contract, the chief education officer leads the provision of services, supported by the contractor. The quarterly monitoring process includes services managed both by the LEA and by the contractor. The education and community management team (ECMT) which includes senior managers of the contractor, is responsible for developing and agreeing the major strategic, policy and planning functions. The contractor, SercoQAA, has responsibility for the services relating to the school improvement function, behaviour support, children in public care, support for attendance, Key Stage 4 excluded pupils and pupils whose parents choose to educate them at home. All other services reside with the LEA although some responsibilities are currently under consideration as

possible variations of the contract. These are identified in the relevant sections of the report.

19. There has been a complete turnover of all members of the senior management team and a new director of education and community services was appointed a year ago. The education and community directorate has been restructured into four main divisions, with an additional fifth area of school effectiveness and strategic management directly managed by the contractor. The joint partnership of the LEA and the contractor has been re-branded as Walsall Education.

Performance

20. Key features of schools' performance, and changes since the last inspection, are as follows:

- attainment on entry to primary schools is significantly below that found nationally;
- standards of attainment remain below national averages in all key stages, with boys usually doing worse than girls. In English at Key Stage 3 this gender gap widens to 20 percentage points, three points above the national figure;
- standards are in line with similar LEAs at Key Stage 1, in mathematics and science at Key Stage 3, and at five or more A* to C grades at GCSE; but below at Key Stage 2 and in English at Key Stage 3;
- at Key Stages 2 and 3, the rate of improvement has been above the national trend for mathematics and science and broadly in line for English. However, in 2001, the results in English dipped at both key stages and at Key Stage 3, the rate of improvement has fallen behind, with 2001 results leaving the LEA well below the national average;
- the proportion of pupils achieving five or more A* to C grades at GCSE has increased at a rate broadly in line with the national trend and with that of statistical neighbours. The proportion achieving one or more A* to G grades in 2001 was in line with the national average. These overall figures however, mask a significant number of relatively poorly performing secondary schools;
- section 10 inspection judgements show that a higher proportion of primary and secondary schools require significant improvement;
- sixteen schools have been judged to require special measures since 1993; two secondary, three special and eleven primary schools. At the time of the last inspection, three primary, one secondary and two special schools required special measures. Currently, one secondary and five primary schools are in this category. A further three schools have serious weaknesses. Two schools, a primary and a secondary school, have been found to be underachieving;
- rates of unauthorised absence have reduced year on year in both primary and secondary schools. They are in line with the national average for primary schools and below the national average for secondary schools. Overall attendance rates

have improved at a faster rate than the national average. Nevertheless, in primary schools, attendance rates remain well below the national average and below statistical neighbours; and

- permanent exclusion rates have reduced each year since the last inspection and are in line with the national average.

Funding

21. The 2001/02 education Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) per pupil for Walsall (£2,872) is lower than statistical neighbours (£2,932), Metropolitan Districts (£2,937) and the English average (£3,093). Walsall's education budget is currently set at 0.87% above SSA.

22. Centrally retained funding is low at £376 per pupil compared with the Metropolitan average of £417 per pupil. Although individual areas of spending are broadly in line, some notable exceptions include:

- the retained statutory and regulatory funding is lower at £35 per pupil than statistical neighbours (£48), Metropolitan districts (£48) and England (£46)
- retained funding for special educational needs is low at £124 compared with statistical neighbours (£143), Metropolitan districts (£146) and England (£152),
- retained funding for Asset Management Planning (AMP) at £4 per pupil is significantly lower than statistical neighbours (£10), Metropolitan districts (£13) and England (£12),

23. Budgets delegated to primary and secondary schools in 2000/01 were below the average for comparator groups.

2000/01	Walsall	Statistical neighbours	Metropolitan districts average
Primary ISB ¹ per pupil	£1,722	£1,758	£1,795
Secondary ISB per pupil	£2,423	£2,517	£2,471

24. The council has taken up most of its Standards Fund allowance in 2001/2002 and it has taken advantage of opportunities for accessing external funding. Walsall has achieved success in attracting funding through the Single Regeneration Budget, Neighbourhood Renewal, and lottery and sports council grants. The LEA has secured capital allocations from the DfES as a result of satisfactory progress on its Asset Management Plan (AMP) and has been active in developing Private Finance Initiative (PFI) schemes to rationalise and improve school provision.

Council structure

25. No political party has an overall majority in the council. For the last two years the Conservative Party has been the ruling party with the support of the Liberal Democrats. However, the Labour Party forms the largest group.

¹ Individual Schools Budget – the term used for schools' delegated budgets

26. The council has retained a traditional committee structure. Responsibility for education services is located in the education and community services committee. A children and young people's scrutiny committee has also been established. An all-party working party has been examining the separation of executive and scrutiny functions and the council has indicated that it hopes to establish an experimental structure with a leader and a cabinet model of administration in early 2002, ready for implementation by July 2002.

The LEA's school improvement strategy

27. The previous inspection identified significant deficiencies in the Education Development Plan (EDP). The quality of activity plans was variable and they lacked sufficient targeting of activities. Overall, the EDP and progress on its implementation were judged to be unsatisfactory.

28. Until the arrival of the director of education at the beginning of 2001 little progress was made in addressing the recommendations in the inspection report or the conditions set by the DfES. Progress on the implementation of the EDP was reviewed and evaluated at that time and Year 3 of the plan was submitted following a full audit of schools' development plans. This included revised activity plans which incorporated, where appropriate, links to the Government's Excellence in Cluster initiative. However, the revised EDP does not take sufficient account of other related plans, particularly for the priority relating to social inclusion. Progress in implementing the LEA's strategy for school improvement has been unsatisfactory.

29. The revised Year 3 of the EDP provides a sound framework for school improvement with appropriate priorities which reflect the council's corporate commitment to raising standards in schools, particularly at Key Stage 4, and the national agenda. They are:

- to improve standards in literacy at Key Stages 1 and 2 and to ensure continuity between Key Stages 2 and 3;
- to improve standards in numeracy in Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 and to ensure continuity between Key Stages 2 and 3;
- to raise standards achieved in Key Stage 4;
- to improve the quality of teaching;
- to improve the provision for inclusive education;
- to improve leadership and management;
- to improve the performance of schools causing concern; and
- to enhance the role of ICT in teaching, learning and managing.

30. Revised activity plans are generally satisfactory and include in some cases, clearer success criteria. However, the lack of rigorous data means that overall the targeting of activities is still not specific enough.

31. Targets within the EDP are challenging but the target setting process is still insecure within many individual schools. Progress against the targets set for 2002 is variable and the LEA is unlikely to meet its revised target in English at Key Stage 2 for 2002. Targets for attendance have been met. Permanent exclusion rates have

reduced each year since the last inspection and are in line with the national figures at both primary and secondary level. However, the number of permanent exclusions in 2001 is above the target set.

32. The contractor is leading on the development of the second EDP (known as EDP2) covering the period 2002 to 2007. The review of the LEA context and an audit of its strengths and weaknesses have taken place, together with a review of the original EDP priorities by the priority managers. This process has been rigorous and draws on a more comprehensive range of achievement, inspection and comparative data than before and should enable more effective targeting of schools and groups of pupils. Communication and consultation with headteachers and other stakeholders have been managed effectively. There is broad support for the three local priorities, in particular, the priority to enhance inclusive education. Detailed activity plans were not complete at the time of the inspection.

The allocation of resources to priorities

33. Some improvements have been made in this area which was previously assessed as poor. However, targeting of resources to priorities remains unsatisfactory overall.

34. There is willingness, expressed by both members and officers, to protect funding for education and to protect school budgets but this is not clearly articulated in any of the corporate planning documents. Financial planning is being developed to ensure that overall resources are matched to departmental priorities but there are few links between these and corporate plans. Similarly, spending within the education budget does not reflect strategic priorities. It is based on unclear, historic criteria and remains demand-driven. The basis of corporate recharges to education is not consistently defined.

35. Since the relatively recent appointment of a head of education finance and resources there has been an in-depth review of current spend and accounting procedures. There are appropriate plans to follow this with a basic review of budget allocations. Effective processes are in place for the better involvement of schools over budget issues. They include a variety of representative groups and the regular circulation of their minutes to all schools. There has not, however, been any fundamental review of the funding formula and no activity-led funding work has taken place.

36. Budget control in the education directorate remains a serious weakness in so far as there is little understanding of budget issues or monitoring by service leaders. There have been inaccuracies in budget-making that are currently being addressed; for example, in the SEN budget. Now that key appointments have been made, plans to address this situation are finally in the process of being implemented.

37. The LEA has met all government spending targets and remains a high delegator to schools at 86.8 per cent. Although the council has achieved success in attracting external funding, there are limited arrangements within the education directorate to co-ordinate, prioritise and support schools in accessing additional resources. Consequently some schools feel that they are missing out on relevant funds.

38. School deficits are acceptably small and controlled, but balances held by schools are too large in too many instances. Forty-eight per cent of primary, 43 per cent of special and 10 per cent of secondary schools have balances in excess of ten per cent. There are mechanisms in place whereby schools inform the LEA of their plans for surpluses and new procedures have been installed to investigate schools that have excessive surpluses year on year.

Recommendations

In order to improve the LEA's targeting of resources to priorities:

- links between performance management and budget monitoring within the directorate should be established;
- the training of service managers, especially in budget management, should be implemented as a matter of urgency; and
- corporate recharges to the education directorate should be subject to agreed standards in terms of specification, activity and costs, and involve service level agreements where appropriate.

Processes for ensuring continuous improvement, including Best Value

39. The LEA does not have satisfactory strategies in place to promote continuous improvement. There is a series of action plans in response to external inspections and audits but no clear comprehensive improvement strategy. There are limited connections between these plans and the corporate and Best Value Performance (BVPP) plan. Walsall Education has, however, carried out an evaluation process as part of the work on the contract and it is intended that all education service plans will link to targets and output specifications within that contract. Similarly, it is intended that links will be made with the corporate plan. Walsall Education is in the process of putting into place an appropriate and detailed performance management structure, but this is not yet fully operational and its impact has yet to be felt.

40. The external auditor judged that the 2001/02 BVPP and management arrangements adequately complied with relevant guidance, but that it did not comply with the requirement to demonstrate consistency with specific aims, objectives and targets within the council's corporate plan; and that various performance indicators and comparative figures were omitted.

41. The authority is acting upon the many recommendations made by the external auditor. Two Best Value reviews (BVRs) within education have been undertaken on education transport and free school meals administration. Although councillors are monitoring the implementation plans for these reviews, there is no record of the reviews themselves having been approved. It was this absence of council approval that resulted in the completed BVRs not being inspected. This is very unsatisfactory.

42. The BV review programme is now focused at a more strategic level than in previous years. As a result, a review is appropriately being undertaken of all areas of education which were not transferred to the strategic partner. An independent review team, comprising staff from across the council, is carrying out these activities. The review process is supported by regular consultation with staff from the service areas. Nevertheless, current processes are not yet adequate and the rigour and breadth of the authority's approach is still being developed to ensure that consultation with stakeholders, challenge to current provision and benchmarking are suitably performed.

Recommendation
In order to improve the Best Value process:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">completed Best Value reviews and their action plans should be approved by relevant members as outlined in the authority's Best Value review preparation pack.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Summary of effectiveness of LEA's support for school improvement

43. Overall, the performance of the school improvement functions remains unsatisfactory. Although individuals within the service have continued to be effective and improvements have been made, overall, insufficient progress has been made since the last inspection. Since the contractor took responsibility for the school improvement function, rapid progress has been made in establishing appropriate services to support school improvement. However, these improvements are undermined by weaknesses at the corporate centre and by the lack of strategic thinking and planning in relation to special educational provision and services to promote social inclusion. The cost of the service is average, but it provides insufficient value for money.

Monitoring, challenge, and intervention

44. At the time of the first inspection, monitoring, challenge and intervention were poor. The LEA had been slow to respond to the Code of Practice on LEA-School Relations and systems for monitoring and challenging schools were under-developed. Support for school improvement lacked coherence and failed to draw together other services from within the directorate. Over the period since the inspection and more particularly since the contractor took responsibility for this function, the actions taken have resulted in significant improvements. Overall, this function is now performed satisfactorily, but there is still much to be done to ensure greater effectiveness in the long term.

45. The LEA has recently consulted on a draft code of practice for LEA, school and partnership relations. This policy provides greater clarity on the respective roles and responsibilities of schools and the LEA, and is underpinned by a clear commitment to encouraging the autonomy of schools within the local education partnership. Since September 2001, the contractor has further developed the LEA's procedures for monitoring, challenge and intervention, and appointed school improvement consultants with strong experience of senior management in schools.

46. Feedback from schools on the visits by consultants in the autumn term 2001 was almost universally positive. An annual cycle of visits, focusing on school self-review, has been agreed and schools are generally familiar with the procedures. The planned visits provide an appropriate balance between the LEA's agenda and schools' needs. All schools receive copies of visit notes and evaluations of their performance. The records seen varied in the quality and clarity of the judgements but recent examples were more incisive and provided a clear assessment of strengths and weaknesses.

47. Currently, the allocation of consultant time across schools is undifferentiated, except for those schools causing concern. This is justified for the current financial year in order for new consultants to build relationships and to develop good knowledge and understanding of their schools. The results of the school survey underlined this aspect as being a weakness in previous LEA practice. The contractor is fully aware of the need to introduce a more differentiated approach in

the next financial year to reflect the principle of intervention in inverse proportion to success.

48. The 'Continuum of School Effectiveness', first developed by the LEA in collaboration with headteachers in 2000, has been refined in recent months and the criteria used as the basis for the categorisation of schools. Schools are informed of their place on the continuum. The categorisation process has been effective in identifying those schools requiring some or significant improvement and in enabling the LEA to target resources to these schools accordingly. However, evidence from interviews and visits demonstrate that not all headteachers fully understand the outcomes of the categorisation process and the resulting levels of support.

49. To date, there has been no delegation of advisory service funding. Some schools therefore, are paying twice for support as they also purchase support and advice from neighbouring authorities and private providers. It is proposed to delegate funding and to introduce service level agreements from April 2002; this essential development in encouraging the greater autonomy of schools is long overdue.

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

50. The extent to which schools have been challenged has been unsatisfactory in the past. The LEA did not have sufficient knowledge and understanding of its schools. There were significant weaknesses in the quality of the performance data on schools and a lack of senior management expertise to challenge schools and governing bodies on aspects of leadership and management. Some of these weaknesses have largely, but not wholly, been addressed and schools report that the target setting and annual review meetings in the autumn term now provide a greater level of challenge. Nevertheless, despite these recent improvements, the overall rate of progress since the last inspection has been too slow and performance remains unsatisfactory.

51. The responsibility for establishing a unified performance data unit was taken on by the contractor in September 2001 despite being a clear recommendation of the inspection report; a contract variation is outstanding for this area of responsibility. The newly formed unit incorporates the curriculum assessment team which has undertaken good work in primary schools to establish pupil tracking systems and the effective use of assessment software. However, a common system to transfer primary school data to secondary schools has still not been established.

52. Target setting processes are not securely established in many schools and remain unsatisfactory. In 2001, over half of the primary schools failed to reach the targets set in English and mathematics. In the school survey, support for target setting and guidance on the use of pupil performance data were rated as unsatisfactory. However, the quality of performance data provided to schools by the contractor's information and performance unit has improved this academic year. Data were made available to schools at an earlier stage, although value added information on individual pupils was not included.

53. Plans are in place to develop a comprehensive school profile by October 2002 which will include value added data by gender and ethnicity, and trends over time. Additional staff have been appointed and a consultant from the contractor with extensive expertise is working to develop a comprehensive management information system which can be used by a range of services and schools to support school improvement. The capacity to make rapid progress in this area is now good.

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

54. Walsall has a high proportion of schools causing concern. In all, over one fifth of the schools are currently in this category, including six schools requiring special measures and three identified as having serious weaknesses. The proportion of schools identified by OFSTED as requiring significant improvement is above the national average. Although improvements have been made in response to the recommendations in the first inspection report, the provision for schools causing concern remains unsatisfactory. Its effectiveness has often depended too much on the individual strengths of the personnel involved. Support is not enabling all schools to make sufficient progress and it has taken far too long to remove some schools from these categories.

55. The identification of schools causing concern has improved since the inspection but the LEA is not yet secure in its knowledge of all schools. The contractor has introduced modifications to the LEA's policy and practice and these are beginning to have an impact. The category of causing concern has been further refined and several schools have been identified and placed in one of three groups, depending on the degree of concern. School improvement consultants with relevant experience and expertise have been recruited to work with these schools and greater challenge is evident in their work. Each school has a project team including the headteacher, chair of governors, the designated consultant and the heads of relevant services from within the education service, which ensures better co-ordination of support. Co-ordination of monitoring and support at LEA level has also been greatly enhanced by the establishment of the priority schools action group. This group draws together senior managers and contract managers from across the service, holds monthly meetings and provides regular monitoring reports for the senior management team and elected members.

56. For the schools involved, there is a noticeable improvement in the speed and quality of the LEA's actions since these changes were instituted. They are very recent and it is too soon to gauge their impact but there is evidence that the basis of a more coherent strategy for co-ordinating and monitoring the LEA's support is being established. There is evidence too of a greater willingness on the part of the LEA to tackle issues of teacher competency and weaknesses in leadership and management.

Support for literacy

57. Support for literacy was judged to be satisfactory in the previous report and it remains so. Progress has been made in addressing both recommendations, although the LEA has been constrained until very recently by the lack of sufficient capacity within the literacy team. Networks of teachers have been established to

spread good practice in special schools, in ICT and in raising boys' achievement amongst identified priorities. The working relationship with the ethnic minority achievement service has improved since it was restructured a year ago. An increased emphasis on the teaching of writing has led to improved performance, particularly by boys.

58. Although standards in English at Key Stage 2 remain below the national average, they rose significantly from a very low base between 1998 and 2000, with rates of improvement among the top ten in the country. The results fell back in 2001 as in a number of local authorities and this leaves the LEA far short of its revised target for 2002, which it is unlikely to reach. Until recently, the lack of reliable data hampered schools' ability to translate their numerical targets into clear action plans. At Key Stage 3, a significant drop in the 2001 results leaves the LEA well below the national average and below statistical neighbours.

59. The contractor has made significant changes since July in a bid to drive up standards. As a direct consequence, the capacity for further improvement in the quality and quantity of support has increased. The strategy manager has been relieved of a range of other responsibilities and additional experienced consultants have been appointed to extend the well-established work at Key Stages 1 and 2 into Key Stage 3 and the Foundation Stage. Protocols have been established to improve communication between the literacy team and school improvement consultants. Target setting is improving rapidly as more reliable data becomes available. Work is becoming better focused and consultants' time used more effectively.

60. Schools in all phases speak more positively of the support they now receive, although at times, the team's response has not always been sufficiently timely or well focused. Competent literacy consultants provide good quality training, and consultancy in primary schools has been directed at improving leadership and management of the strategy. Leading literacy teachers have been used creatively to support the increased focus on children's writing. However, in some intensive schools, insufficient time has been given to work with teachers in the classroom. Continuity issues have been addressed through a large number of summer schools, although the inability to track the progress of individual pupils has meant that their impact has not been consolidated.

Support for numeracy

61. At the last inspection, the implementation of the numeracy strategy was at a very early stage, and support was judged to be good. In the last two years, the numeracy team has continued to make progress because of strong leadership, detailed planning and a comprehensive training programme that takes good account of national and local priorities, including the use of consultants to demonstrate good practice in the classroom.

62. Between 1998 and 2001, standards have been rising faster than they have nationally at Key Stages 1,2 and 3. The use of self-generated data has led to better quality analysis and closer targeting of support. However, the LEA still has some way to go. Results at Key Stages 1 and 3 remain below the national average but match those of statistical neighbours. At Key Stage 2, results are well below the national

average and ten per cent short of the LEA's revised target, although recent analysis by the team indicates that the target may be within reach.

63. Support for numeracy since the last inspection is satisfactory with significant strengths. The shortcomings have contributed to the continuing low standards at Key Stage 2 and much work remains to be done with under performing schools if the target is to be achieved. The numeracy team's more rigorous targeting of schools and the more sharply focused support increase this likelihood. In addition, the high credibility of leading mathematics teachers is making a marked impact in those schools in the greatest need of support.

64. Schools in all phases are more positive about the quality of training and support they receive. Although secondary support is well regarded, until the implementation of the Key Stage 3 strategy, it has not been extensive. Under the leadership of a newly appointed strategy manager, momentum has been maintained and the team has the capacity to drive ahead. Within the new configuration of the school improvement service, links are being made with other school improvement teams, although more work needs to be done with the ethnic minority achievement service.

Support for information and communication technology (ICT)

65. The provision of support for information and communication technology (ICT) was previously assessed as good. No detailed fieldwork was conducted in this inspection. In the school survey, the support for ICT in the curriculum was rated as good, placing the LEA in the top quartile of LEAs surveyed to date. The LEA was part of a recent national evaluation of ICT in schools conducted by HMI. This survey reaffirmed the effectiveness of the LEA's provision; most notably, the high quality, credible and respected ICT team.

Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3

66. The LEA's current performance is unsatisfactory and the contractor is rigorously addressing clearly identified weaknesses. There has been a weak base on which to build, but recent work with secondary schools in raising awareness of the LEA's new strategy has had a positive impact and the strategy provides a firm basis for further improvement.

67. Transition from Key Stage 2 to 3 has been an area of significant weakness but little has been done in the past to address the regression that occurs in the early stages of Key Stage 3. The quality of data is developing but is still insufficient and the LEA is subsequently not able to track the progress of pupils from Key Stage 2 to 3, or to target specific groups. Although summer schools have been held in literacy and numeracy for those pupils who have not achieved the national standard, there has not been a co-ordinated approach to developing better understanding and trust between primary and secondary schools. Current plans to raise teachers' expectations do not address this issue in detail. The LEA recognises that considerable work is needed in schools in certain areas of the borough.

68. The LEA was not a pilot authority for the national strategy but has taken good account of lessons learned. Implementation is at an early stage but is well led by a strategy manager with credible experience and enthusiasm. The need to appoint strand co-ordinators of high calibre is also recognised as being a high priority. The contractor has developed a coherent strategy that takes good account of the Excellence in Cluster initiative and the use of an expanding number of advanced skills teachers to raise expectations and disseminate good practice. The need to develop strong links with other key services within the directorate has been identified.

69. Results present a mixed picture. Standards had risen year on year in English, mathematics and science until 2000, with rates of improvement above the national trend in mathematics and science and in line in English. However, in 2001, whilst standards continued to rise in science, there was a significant decline in English against the national trend and that of statistical neighbours. Standards are now well below the national average. Standards also dropped back slightly in mathematics against both trends. Progress between Key Stages 2 and 3 in English and science is not good enough.

70. The LEA does not have the data to demonstrate whether attendance and exclusion rates are improving at Key Stage 3. Although significant advances have been made recently, there is some way to go before comprehensive and reliable data are available. In spite of this, every effort has been made to identify needs accurately and to establish that support and training meet local needs and are tailored to address individual school circumstances. The second EDP contains an accurate analysis of most issues and sets challenging targets.

Recommendation
In order to halt the regression in the early years of Key Stage 3:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">joint working between primary and secondary schools should be improved to secure the efficient transfer of data.

Support for minority ethnic groups including Travellers

71. The support for this function was previously judged to be unsatisfactory and was subject to recommendations. The LEA has made satisfactory progress since the last inspection in consulting with schools and community interests on the allocation of the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant (EMAG) and has restructured the service to schools. The service is now better placed to meet the range of schools' needs. Support for minority ethnic pupils, including Traveller children, is satisfactory with a number of strengths and one remaining weakness that is being actively addressed by the contractor.

72. Consultants appointed to the new Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS). in January 2001 have rapidly established credibility with schools in all phases. The team is providing increasingly well-focused support, training and guidance to schools

following thorough identification of needs. Further progress has been made since the appointment in June 2001 of a senior post in EMAS. The team is outward looking and is forming strong working relationships within the education service and with other agencies. The inclusion of EMAS within the school improvement service is beginning to bring greater coherence and co-ordination with other services. Schools in receipt of grant funding speak of a marked improvement in the quality of the service and the rigour injected into planning and monitoring provision.

73. Service planning is now of a good standard. The EMAG action plan is comprehensive and well focused. It links well to the EDP, takes account of local issues and national data, and has innovative elements. The draft equalities action plan is a good example of collaboration and makes coherent links between the corporate plan, the EMAG plan and the Traveller Achievement Grant plan. The LEA is not in a position to analyse the performance of all minority ethnic groups by gender and key stage and as a consequence EDP2 does not contain targets. However, the EMAS has been proactive in working with the curriculum and assessment team and schools in order to capitalise on the data when it becomes available later on this year.

74. Provision for supported Traveller children is satisfactory and improving. Schools are taking increasing responsibility for their Traveller children and can draw on effective support, advice and resources to meet their needs. Progress is effectively monitored. As a result of constructive work with secondary schools in welcoming Traveller families into their school communities, parents are not electing to educate their children at home as is increasingly happening in other parts of the country. There are improved levels of communication between the service and the West Midlands Consortium Education Service for Traveller Children. Work has been done to bring children into school from unauthorised sites and to track mobility.

75. The education directorate has taken constructive steps to raise awareness of 'Learning for All' through primary and secondary conferences and has promoted the Council for Racial Equality standards with all schools. The equal opportunities board within education has actively developed this agenda ahead of other council departments. There is a comprehensive programme of training and support available that focuses on issues including raising achievement, global citizenship and diversity.

Recommendation
In order to target more effectively the work of the services that support minority ethnic pupils including Traveller children:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">comprehensive and reliable data should be collated and provided for schools and used to establish targets in the second EDP that enable achievement to be measured.

Support for gifted and talented pupils

76. The LEA has started from a very low base and the present performance of this function is unsatisfactory. At all key stages, fewer pupils achieve at higher levels than those of statistical neighbours and nationally, and rates of improvement are below the national average. There has been no overall strategy for identifying and supporting gifted and talented pupils, nor has their performance been consistently evaluated in order to inform future developments. Furthermore, the needs of gifted and talented pupils were not specified within the present contract with the SercoQAA.

77. However, rapid progress has been made in the last six months to remedy the situation, although there has been little impact in schools to date. The contractor has established a comprehensive and coherent strategy and the Excellence in Cluster manager has undertaken a thorough audit. As a result, raising the achievement of gifted and talented pupils has been identified as a separate activity in the second EDP. However, future funding, roles and responsibilities within the proposed strategy require further clarification.

78. The gifted and talented strand within EiC is central to the LEA's strategy, and has led to borough-wide dissemination and training. The EiC co-ordinator for this strand has recently been appointed, as have school co-ordinators, and all initial training will be completed this term. Schools within the cluster have begun to identify cohorts of both gifted and talented pupils from the early years onwards. The contractor has demonstrated its capacity to improve further. The quality of performance data is developing rapidly, and the contractor plans to use school improvement consultants and advanced skills teachers to identify and share good practice. The borough has specialist colleges in sports and languages who are beginning to share their expertise. The Walsall music support service was part of a recent national evaluation conducted by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) and was judged to be very well managed with a curriculum support programme that is raising standards of music in schools.

Recommendation
In order to ensure the implementation of the agreed strategy to support gifted and talented pupils:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• a variation in the contract should be negotiated which identifies clearly the sources of funding required, and the respective roles and responsibilities within the partnership.

Support for school management

79. Support for school management was poor at the time of the last inspection. There were some positive features but overall provision lacked co-ordination and was not supporting headteachers in school self-review and evaluation. The LEA has made some improvement, particularly in the provision of guidance on self-evaluation and feedback on the quality and implementation of school development plans

through its monitoring and review programme. It has successfully brokered the OFSTED accredited training in school self-evaluation for all schools, with over three-quarters of schools participating. However, these actions were not part of a coherent strategy to develop the overall quality of leadership and management within the borough. Schools' capacity for self-evaluation is not securely established and is further undermined by the lack of robust performance data and wider benchmarking information. The current provision is unsatisfactory.

80. Since the Walsall Education partnership has been established, there has been rapid progress to audit training needs across the authority as the basis for a more strategic approach. Consultation with schools has been thorough. A head of continuous professional development has been appointed, targeted training for senior managers is available and plans to provide and broker training opportunities for senior and middle managers are well advanced. Participation in the national leadership programmes has increased this year. Walsall Education is introducing a school self-evaluation software package later this term, targeting schools causing concern as a priority. Walsall Education is collaborating with the Black Country School Improvement Partnership, to explore innovative new models for the delivery of services. This work is in the early stages of development.

Recommendation

In order to improve schools' capacity for self-review and evaluation:

- robust data and benchmarking information on schools' performance should be developed; and training and support provided for their interpretation and use at senior and middle management levels.

Support to governors

81. Support for school governance was poor at the time of the last inspection and was the subject of two key recommendations. Advice on administrative matters was effective but much of the other support was reactive and not part of a coherent strategy for school improvement. Training and advice, in particular to develop the strategic role of governors, were inadequate. Until recently progress had been slow. This was reflected in the school survey where schools rated LEA support to be unsatisfactory, and slightly lower than the first inspection. Nevertheless, rapid progress has now been made and, as a result of enhanced staffing and restructuring of the service by the contractor, there is good capacity for further improvement. Support for governors is now satisfactory.

82. Earlier structural weaknesses in the service have been addressed. A unified governor support and development team was established in October 2001 under the management of the contractor, and has been relocated within the standards and effectiveness branch. The recent creation of a part-time post of governor development officer has enabled the team to undertake a long overdue analysis of training and support needs in consultation with schools. A governor-training programme based on core and optional modules has been developed and will commence this term. However, the central training programme for new governors

and clerks and for those with specific roles and responsibilities is not yet fully in place.

83. Communication with governors has improved and now includes termly briefings for chairs of governing bodies and for clerks, newsletters, the establishment of a governor helpline and the provision of core agenda and information for governors' meetings. Governors report that staff are helpful and accessible, and respond promptly to enquiries. The co-ordination of support for governors in schools causing concern has improved through closer working arrangements with school improvement consultants and the priority schools action group. Targeted work to increase the strategic capacity of governing bodies in this category of school has commenced. This work is in the very early stages of development and there are a number of schools where weaknesses in governance remain to be tackled.

The effectiveness of services to support school management

84. Arrangements for supporting schools in their procurement of services are currently unsatisfactory. Although information provided on services to schools is presented in a consistent and easily accessible format, the LEA does not generally seek to assist schools in accessing or kite-marking other providers. Insufficient help is provided to schools to enable them to become informed purchasers of services.

85. The main services in the annual booklet offer several levels of provision including a "pay as you use" option and contain information on non-traded services. However details of service standards are uneven and vague. Currently there is no system for deciding which services should be offered and the booklet does not cover all relevant provision, for example, school meals and cleaning. There is no formal complaints procedure and methods of costing are not transparent. There are systems in place to monitor and evaluate provision but these do not apply to those service supplied from other departments of the council. The head of education finance and resources has now taken charge of co-ordinating these activities and they will be passed to the contractor in due course.

86. **The finance support services** in Walsall were satisfactory during the previous inspection. The report highlighted that more should be done to enable schools to manage their budgets for themselves and commented on the difficulties caused by the complexities of the corporate accounting system.

87. The service continues to be satisfactory although insufficient progress has been made on the issues identified in the last inspection report. There has been little progress in increasing schools' confidence in budget planning and resource management. There are long term plans to replace the central accounting system, but this has not yet occurred and it remains unwieldy. However, the support provided to individual schools from the local management officers (LMOs) is highly regarded and the service offers a selection of traded provision designed to meet schools' needs.

88. Although progress has been slow, there have been improvements in some areas. There are much better links with corporate finance. Local management officers now participate in the priority schools action group to ensure co-ordination in

support for schools causing concern. The timeliness of budget statements has improved and monthly monitoring reports have been redesigned in consultation with schools. Internal audit works well and its communication with schools is clear and precise. Similarly payroll functions well and has a low error rate. However, the return of annual Best Value statements from schools is not actively pursued and service managers do not currently monitor and manage their budgets. There are plans to rectify this.

Recommendation
In order to improve financial services:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more should be done to promote and support schools in becoming autonomous resource and budget managers and to ensure that schools fulfil the requirement to submit an annual Best Value statement.

89. **Personnel support** to schools remains unsatisfactory and is poorly regarded by schools. This is an under-resourced service which is struggling to supply the comprehensive provision that schools require. Personnel management and administration are still delivered from two units within the corporate personnel department. All aspects of the service were rated by schools to be in the bottom 25 per cent of LEAs surveyed and casework advice was considered by secondary schools to be significantly worse than during the previous inspection.

90. The current personnel manual for schools is out of date and disorganised and model policies for schools in key areas are not provided. Advice is not given to schools on what they should look for in an alternative provider of personal services. However, most contract of employment statements are issued within the statutory time period and appropriate monitoring systems are being developed. Personnel links with payroll are generally reliable and accurate. There are regular formal and informal channels of communications with the unions and industrial tribunals in the current year are low. The service successfully handled the complex personnel issues involved in the recent restructuring in the directorate and in the setting up of the contract with the strategic partner.

Recommendations
In order to provide more effective personnel support to schools:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the capacity of the personnel support service should be enhanced; and • the personnel manual for schools should be urgently updated to ensure it reflects the most recent legislation, model policies should be offered to schools, and regular updates of both circulated to all schools.

91. **Property services** were unsatisfactory during the last inspection. Progress in addressing the recommendations of the previous report has been generally satisfactory. Overall this function is now satisfactory with strengths outweighing

weaknesses. There are improved links between school organisation planning, asset management planning and school improvement planning; for example, in the proposed Public Finance Initiative (PFI) in South Willenhall. However, this good practice is not yet fully embedded across all aspects of LEA support

92. Technical support is available for schools to purchase through a range of packages, which can be tailored to meet individual school's needs. Work is rightly prioritised in consultation with schools. Schools are surveyed regularly on the quality of property services and the results are used to monitor performance targets and to improve services. Schools are provided with lists of external contractors and a guide for governors on developing school premises is being prepared. Building emergencies in schools are dealt with effectively. Nevertheless, schools regard the standard of this support as variable. School-building projects are not consistently completed on time and within budget. Insufficient time has been allowed for planning and implementation of such projects.

93. There is a serious backlog of building work arising from previous under-investment by the council. The authority has been successful in securing New Deal for Schools (NDS) funding to help address this backlog. It has rightly sought to bring in other additional funding through support for PFI and through the City Academy. However, since the introduction of asset management planning, the council has failed to allocate sufficient of its own resources, relying instead on continuing external funding for capital projects. In addition, it is not clear how the capacity for managing these projects, alongside other planned commitments, will be sustained. This is unsatisfactory.

Recommendation
In order to support urgent improvements to the condition of school buildings as identified in the asset management plan:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">the authority should identify resources, and should work to secure maximum external investment.

94. The use of ICT for school administration and electronic transfer of data was judged to be a strength in the last inspection. Schools surveyed and focus groups interviewed during this inspection confirmed that this remains the case. In conjunction with the contractor, the LEA is continuing to develop its ICT strategy to support school improvement through the purchase of appropriate software, the development of Assessment Manager, and the planned introduction of systems for pupil tracking and target setting. No detailed fieldwork was carried out in this area.

95. Both the client service and the in-house contract provision for **grounds maintenance** and **cleaning and caretaking** are satisfactory. Schools are able to access in-house provision easily. There are clear systems for providing advice to those wishing to make other arrangements. Effective consultation processes are in place and there is a system of regular monitoring and evaluation. Problems are

generally dealt with promptly and satisfactorily. Services provide schools with satisfactory value for money

96. Despite recent legal difficulties over the letting of the schools' meals contract, both the client service and the in-house contract provision for **catering** are satisfactory. The service no longer makes a trading loss, as it did at the time of the last inspection. Consultation processes with schools are well established and there are tight monitoring and evaluation systems in place. Problems are generally satisfactorily dealt with and within a reasonable timescale.

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

97. The LEA's work in this area is currently satisfactory. Recent changes, in particular since the Walsall Education partnership took over responsibility, have been positive and demonstrate good capacity for further improvement.

98. Unfilled vacancies for teachers in the borough are below the national average and that of statistical neighbours. There are, however, difficulties in appointing specialist staff in English and mathematics in some parts of the borough and the age profile of teachers is rising, particularly in secondary and special schools. The LEA has undertaken two trawls of schools to develop data on staffing but the information is not robust enough to predict longer term needs and further work is planned.

99. At the time of the review of the EDP, the improved recruitment and retention of teachers was identified as a strategy to improve the quality of teaching. The LEA, as a key partner within the Black Country Consortium, has established a close working relationship with the consortium's recruitment strategy manager. A primary pool for the recruitment of newly qualified teachers across the four LEAs in the consortium will be in place for the first time in 2002. The LEA has extensive links with private providers and a recent headteacher/contractor joint initiative to recruit teachers trained overseas has resulted in the appointment of 13 teachers from Australia. At present, however, these various initiatives are hampered by the lack of sufficient staffing, particularly within personnel.

100. The overall strategy for continuous professional development (CPD) is still being developed following consultation with schools. The involvement of the contractor and the collaboration with the Black Country School Improvement Partnership is leading to an increasingly wide range of providers and training programmes available for schools. Tailored packages of support and training have been developed for individual schools and for clusters of schools, drawing, where possible, on the expertise of advanced skills teachers. The programme for the induction of new headteachers provides an effective introduction to the LEA and mentoring arrangements. The organisation and management of the induction programme for newly qualified teachers has improved this year and there are good opportunities for further accreditation and appropriate feedback to the teacher and school. A professional development programme for teachers in their second and third years of teaching has also been introduced this year.

The effectiveness of services to support school improvement

101. At the time of the last inspection, the work of the former inspection and curriculum services was judged to be unsatisfactory and failing to have sufficient impact on schools. The service has experienced considerable upheaval and change since that time. Individuals within the service have continued to be effective and improvements have been made, but progress has been intermittent. The prospect of further sustained improvement within this service is now good but is dependent on the continuity of staffing; particularly, the appointment of a Head of school improvement and of the school improvement consultants.

102. The transfer of almost one hundred staff to the employment of the contractor has been handled particularly well by the LEA and the contractor. Since July 2001, when the contractor took responsibility for the school improvement function, rapid progress has been made in establishing the services to support schools. Earlier improvements made by the LEA have been built on, and more rigorous systems put in place. Although still early days, there is evidence that the support for school improvement is improving. Following a skills audit of existing staff, additional school improvement consultants were recruited for a two-year period. The improvement in the calibre and expertise of consultants has been welcomed by schools. Induction procedures and arrangements for the continuing professional development of all staff are sound, including further training to enhance consultancy skills.

103. Service planning at individual team level is generally sound. One-year development plans are linked to the specifications of the contract. The quality of these plans is variable and in many instances comprise a listing of actions without the necessary sequencing to indicate how the outcomes will be achieved. Nevertheless, these plans provide an initial and much needed framework for focused activity and are forming the basis of individual performance plans as part of the new performance management arrangements.

104. Prior to the appointment of the contractor, the rationale for the allocation of support to schools varied considerably across the different teams. Previously disparate services have now been brought together. The deployment of staff in those services fulfilling similar roles to the previous inspection and curriculum services is now satisfactory overall and increasingly focused on areas of greatest need, particularly in the work of school improvement consultants. Support teams for behaviour, attendance, exclusions and ethnic minority achievement are now part of a more coherent service. However, the deployment of services such as the educational psychology services, the learning support services, the education welfare service and behaviour support services remains unsatisfactory. Overall strategic planning to provide a coherent package of support to schools is still underdeveloped. All services are not yet providing sufficiently coherent, co-ordinated and effective support to schools to help them improve.

SECTION 3: SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

The Effectiveness of the LEA's strategy for special educational needs

105. The previous inspection found that the LEA's management and development of its policy on special educational needs (SEN) were inadequate and made clear recommendations for improvement. Insufficient progress has been made and two years after the first inspection, Walsall LEA still does not have an agreed strategy. Its performance remains poor.

106. After a long period of intermittent development and protracted consultation, a draft policy and strategic plan has recently been circulated to schools for further consultation. The draft policy has been well received by schools as a sign of potential progress in an area in which schools continue to face great frustration and concern. An SEN steering group has been established which, while slow to get off the ground, has provided a welcome opportunity for representatives from schools to meet with officers to discuss the way forward.

107. The strategic plan presents a step forward but has weaknesses and is still not satisfactory. It identifies many appropriate tasks under three broad areas for development, allocates responsibility, and sets out an indicative time-frame for development. However, the proposals present a daunting agenda for development that may not be feasible within the timescale that has been established. The draft strategic plan does not specify clearly the responsibilities of the schools or the outcome targets that can be expected. Important areas, such as the future provision and role of special schools, are still too vague. Costs and financial planning that would help to make the proposed developments feasible have not been tackled in any meaningful way. While schools have welcomed the policy, this lack of financial planning undermines their confidence that the plan is capable of being implemented. However, immediate priorities have been identified and included in the Education and Community Services Development Plan for October 2001–2002, and provide a more manageable agenda for immediate development.

108. The LEA continues to have direct responsibility for SEN. A month before this inspection, a new lead officer took up post following a long period of part-time interim leadership. The officer has made an accurate assessment of the current situation and identified appropriate priorities for development. Elected members broadly accept that management and organisation of special educational needs are unsatisfactory and in need of improvement. However, they have not been sufficiently briefed on the difficulties that exist and their implications for future developments.

109. A parent partnership has been in operation for about four years. The parent partnership officers are currently managed by the head of the SEN and the pupil transport services' assessment and review procedures unit. This does little to foster the required independence of the parent partnership officers or the development of a strong and independent parental voice to inform SEN developments.

Recommendations

In order to improve the policy and strategy for special education needs:

- the draft policy should be completed quickly and schools' responsibilities for the development of SEN clarified;
- the strategy for SEN should be improved by providing feasible one-year and three-year development plans which identify the proposed developments, provide detail about the intentions, and include sound financial planning;
- elected members and other stakeholders should be made fully aware of proposed developments and intended outcomes; and
- the management arrangements for the parent partnership officers should be reviewed.

The Discharge of statutory responsibilities

110. The LEA continues to take steps to meet its statutory responsibilities and has improved the number of statements that are issued within the advised time limits. However, while the LEA formally discharges its responsibilities, this is not done in a transparent way which demonstrates clearly that deployment of resources is proportionate to need.

Support for school improvement

111. The management of the implementation of the Code of Practice is very poor. Other than improvements in the speed at which statements are issued, this shows no improvement since the first inspection. There are no criteria to help schools to identify needs in a consistent way, or any procedures to achieve greater consistency through moderation. Procedures to assess, and allocate support to pupils at Stages 3 to 5 are exceptionally bureaucratic and often result in schools conducting a considerable amount of extra work with little tangible result. This process, combined with the way in which support services are deployed, does not enable schools to respond sufficiently quickly to needs or to prevent escalation. Support is deployed on the basis of the referral of individual children rather than as an allocation whereby schools, in negotiation with the service, can manage support in a flexible way. A very high number of requests for statutory assessment are made and about 50 per cent of applications are refused. No discussions have taken place with schools about ways in which demand can be more efficiently managed.

112. With the exception of the pre-school service and the enhanced nursery provision which have helped to foster inclusion and address needs at an early stage, the current organisation of support does little to stimulate early intervention or to promote schools' responsibility and capacity to make better provision for pupils. Some helpful and good quality training is provided. However, it is provided by each service independently and programmes are not co-ordinated or specifically directed at the LEA's proposed developments

113. The management of the support services is very poor and, despite clear recommendations, this has not improved since the last inspection. Co-ordination

between the work of the different services is unacceptably poor with many schools consistently reporting disagreements between services. Schools also report that they receive support of an inconsistent standard, particularly from the education psychology service, and that the scope and effectiveness of the support depend too heavily on the individual members of staff who are deployed. There are no service level agreements or clear time allocations through which schools can monitor the support they receive. Procedures for managing development planning and performance management have not been developed. Monitoring of the outcomes and objectives specified in the contract is perfunctory and has not been consistently undertaken by the educational psychology service.

114. Albeit very late in the day, these procedures are now under review. The appointment of a new principal officer for special educational needs, together with an appointment by the contractor of a new school improvement consultant for special educational needs give grounds for some optimism that these difficulties which have existed for far too long will now be tackled. The education committee has already approved a restructuring of the support services to provide a more unified approach. Plans are being laid for the co-ordination of training programmes and revisions are taking place to the way in which the Code of Practice is being implemented.

Recommendations

In order to improve schools' capacity and capability for managing special education needs, coherent systems should be developed that:

- clarify schools' responsibilities for pupils with special needs;
- deploy resources and support according to clear and consistent criteria which help to identify exceptional needs and promote schools' ability to manage support in a flexible way; and
- provide a co-ordinated training programme which is targeted at meeting the objectives of the draft policy.

Recommendations

In order to improve the management of the SEN support services so that schools receive a consistent standard of support:

- steps should be taken to devolve funding for special educational needs to schools, accompanied by service level agreements which clearly specify schools' entitlement to services and those services which can be provided to schools; and
- service planning and performance management systems should be introduced which build on regular monitoring and evaluation of performance through, for example, analysis of published performance indicators, scrutiny of LEA performance data, quarterly monitoring of the contract and Best Value reviews; and which develop a more consistent level of performance across the services.

Value for money

115. Most budgets for SEN are not delegated or devolved to schools and monitoring and control are seldom sufficient to prevent overspends. There is a lack of clarity about the proportion of the schools' budget that is allocated for special educational needs. This does not help to clarify the schools' responsibilities or to manage demand. Proposals to devolve money to secondary schools for statements of SEN were delayed at the request of secondary headteachers because the amount of funding which would be devolved was unclear. A false and unhelpful division is often made between the financial mechanisms which are necessary to meet targets for delegation and the objectives which will lead to improvements in the management and organisation of special educational needs. This does not make the best use of financial mechanisms to drive and promote change

116. There are too many inefficiencies inherent in current practices. Resources are deployed without the rigorous application of criteria and moderation, and the rate of refusal of applications for statutory assessment is far too high. Monitoring takes place only through the annual review of individual pupil statements. Data are not drawn together in a general way so that they can be used to scrutinise the progress made or standards achieved and thereby assess the effectiveness of the support provided and its value for money. Given the current inefficiencies and the lack of progress since the last inspection, value for money is very poor.

Recommendations

In order to improve the value for money which is provided by the SEN budget:

- the extent of the SEN budget should be clarified, systems of monitoring and control improved and an indicative sum which schools are allocated through the schools budget for SEN should be specified;
- criteria should be devised for the consistent deployment of resources and support, an audit of current allocations conducted based on those criteria and plans made to correct any anomalies; and
- management information should be improved and then used to plan provision, and to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of SEN provision and support.

SECTION 4: PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION

Summary of effectiveness in promoting social inclusion

117. The LEA's overall effectiveness in promoting social inclusion was unsatisfactory at the time of the last inspection. In two years, the government's agenda has moved forward and elected members and senior officers have failed to grasp its importance. Social inclusion strategies that were previously unsatisfactory or poor have, in all cases, failed to improve or have deteriorated. Furthermore, the arrangements for protecting children from significant harm are now unsatisfactory. The LEA is now very poor at promoting social inclusion. Its self-evaluation demonstrated a poor level of awareness of current performance and its capacity to improve is uncertain.

118. There is a low level of understanding and commitment of elected members to the principles of social inclusion. There is no overarching strategy to promote social inclusion at a corporate level. The willingness to respond to government-funded initiatives has led to the introduction of a large number of individually worthwhile, but disparate, initiatives without the existence of a coherent strategy or the necessary structures to promote communication, co-ordination and dissemination. The education department's slow progress in revising the Behaviour Support Plan and in developing an SEN and inclusion strategy has left schools without a coherent framework in which to plan. Far too little has been done to raise levels of awareness or to provide a borough-wide rationale to support new initiatives and has led to schools working in isolation.

119. Until recently, the poor quality of available data and the ineffective systems of monitoring and evaluation at both a strategic and operational level have not enabled the authority to target underachieving groups effectively. The targets for children in public care are notional and there are no targets for minority ethnic pupils because the present quality of data is poor. The attainment and progress of pupils educated otherwise than at school is not monitored systematically.

120. The contractor has begun to provide the necessary expertise and impetus to improve all those services that come within the school improvement service. However, without an unequivocally strong commitment from elected members and a fully integrated strategic approach across Walsall Education, the council and all partners, the impact of this will be dissipated.

Recommendations

In order to provide a coherent strategy for social inclusion:

- establish a clear framework for planning at a strategic level so that schools and services understand their respective roles and responsibilities;
- ensure that elected members are well briefed and have a clear understanding of their statutory responsibilities; and
- as a matter of urgency, ensure that the quality of data is improved and rigorous monitoring procedures are introduced across all departments in order to identify needs and target resources.

The supply of school places

121. The effectiveness of the LEA in relation to the provision of school places was satisfactory in the previous inspection. No detailed fieldwork was undertaken in this area. However, schools' views and the LEA's own view indicate that it is still satisfactory and improving. Primary schools rated the service significantly higher in the school survey than during the previous inspection. The School Organisation Plan 2001-2006 meets most statutory requirements and has been approved by the School Organisation Committee.

Admissions

122. The effectiveness of the LEA in relation to admission to schools was previously assessed as good. Schools, especially secondary schools, and the LEA, indicate that provision continues to be good. No detailed inspection work was carried out in this area.

Asset management

123. Asset management planning was assessed as satisfactory in the previous inspection. No detailed inspection work was carried out in this area. The LEA's self-evaluation indicates that it is still satisfactory. This is mainly based on a recent assessment of the local policy statement and Asset Management Plan (AMP) by the DfES. That assessment did, however, identify a number of areas to be strengthened in the AMP including: selection of schools, identification of surplus and shortfall, assessment of disabilities and SEN impacts, and moderation and quality assurance. The authority is currently working with the DfES to address these issues.

Provision for pupils with no school place

124. The LEA's provision was judged previously to be poor. Overall, this provision has deteriorated. Poor leadership and management at a senior level have led to a piecemeal approach, which is further exacerbated by the way in which the contract allocates responsibility. The contractor is responsible for Key Stage 4 excluded pupils and pupils whose parents choose to educate them at home, and the LEA retains responsibility for younger excluded pupils, the two pupil referral units and

home tuition for sick pupils. While there is a commitment to work together to ensure that there is comprehensive and coherent provision, it is unclear who has the strategic overview of provision. Furthermore, funding for children educated otherwise is unclear.

125. Very poor progress has been made in developing a strategy to provide younger pupils with effective provision. The average time that pupils spend out of school has reduced but is still unacceptably high. At all key stages, the hours of provision are far too low. There is no certainty that the LEA can meet the statutory requirement of 25 hours by September 2002

126. The LEA has failed to respond to the lack of systems to assure and review the quality of provision identified in the previous inspection report. In April 2000, a section 10 inspection judged the pupil referral unit for school phobics to have serious weaknesses because of the poor leadership and management of the LEA and the very poor accommodation. The LEA has failed in its duty to take timely and effective action. The lack of political will to remedy the present poor quality of LEA provision and the negligent response to the Section 10 report on the pupil referral unit (PRU) serve to illustrate the absence of a robust strategy for social inclusion. Provision is now very poor.

127. The collection and analysis of data is poor and there is no unified approach to planning. Although pupils at Key Stage 4 who receive alternative provision are now tracked systematically, along with a number who are in danger of being excluded, and communication with providers has improved, the LEA has not established comprehensive procedures for identifying and tracking 'missing pupils'. It concedes that the monitoring of home-educated pupils needs improvement. In the absence of a revised Behaviour Support Plan, the draft EDP2 includes only one activity that solely addresses the development of provision at Key Stage 4.

128. One area of success has been the support provided to pregnant school girls through Sure Start Plus which has enabled them to remain in school as long as possible before the birth and to continue their education afterwards. In addition, the close partnership that the behaviour, attendance and exclusions service (BAES) has established with The Vine, an independent provider and initial assessment centre, is an example of good practice in enabling disaffected pupils at Key Stage 4 to make a fresh start.

129. The LEA is failing many of its most vulnerable children and most worryingly, its self-evaluation states that the provision has improved and is now satisfactory. The LEA has not demonstrated the capacity to improve.

Recommendation

In order to ensure that pupils excluded for more than 15 days receive effective provision that can meet statutory requirements by September 2002:

- publish a costed plan with specific timescales to meet the required deadline; and
- reduce the time that any pupil waits for provision to no more than four weeks.

In order to establish value for money and ensure that pupils receive an appropriate standard of education and make satisfactory progress:

- as a matter of urgency, address the serious weaknesses identified in the Section 10 report on the pupil referral unit for school phobics; and
- implement procedures for monitoring the quality and effectiveness of provision for all pupils educated otherwise than at school.

School attendance

130. Support for attendance was unsatisfactory at the time of the last inspection. It remains unsatisfactory. The LEA has made limited progress in addressing the recommendations to target resources more effectively. It has provided guidance on policies and procedures, although not enough has been done to spread good practice. Following the district auditor's report a year ago, improvements were made to the quality of data collection and analysis in order to make the service more efficient. The education welfare service (EWS) became the responsibility of the contractor in July. Since then, there has been clear progress in addressing the inadequacies of the previous structure and the lack of clarity around the roles and responsibilities of the EWS and schools, and in addressing staff development needs. The effectiveness of support is improving fast, with a coherent strategy in EDP2 to tackle the outstanding weaknesses.

131. The LEA has been successful in reducing the rates of unauthorised absence in both primary and secondary schools. The target for primary schools has been exceeded and rates are in line with the national average. The secondary target is within reach and rates are below the national average. From a low base, overall rates of attendance in both primary and secondary have improved at a faster rate than nationally. In spite of this, there is a need for further improvement, particularly in primary schools, where attendance rates remain well below the national average and below statistical neighbours. This has been due to wide variations in practice, inadequate monitoring and evaluation, and the absence of a strategy to disseminate good practice. Improvements have generally been made either as a result of the work of individual education welfare officers (EWOs) or through individual schools' efforts. Although schools have individual attendance targets, these have not been used sufficiently to focus the work of area teams or to prioritise the work of EWOs.

132. The EWS is now an integral part of the school improvement service. Following wide consultation and a skills audit, radical plans are in place to transform the structure and practice of the service. There is a commitment to new ways of

working. The involvement of EWOs in project teams that support under performing schools is proving effective. The introduction of new service level agreements will provide all schools with greater clarity of roles and responsibilities and enable more effective targeting of resources to need. The imminent introduction of budget planning at service level and of performance management should ensure that mechanisms are in place to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the service. The appointment of a principal EWO is essential for the realisation of these plans. Historically, the EWS has employed fewer qualified staff than other LEAs and at a lower salary. It is recognised that these issues have to be addressed in building an effective service.

Behaviour support

133. Support for behaviour was unsatisfactory at the time of the last inspection. The lack of action at a strategic level in addressing the weaknesses identified has led to a decline in the service and its performance is currently poor.

134. The LEA did not carry out the previous report's recommendation concerning the delegation of funding for behaviour support to secondary schools. The LEA has not explored funding options and has not put adequate systems in place to monitor how the pupil retention grant is spent, or its impact on reducing poor behaviour. It has made slow progress in working with schools to improve the consistency of school policies and systems, particularly in secondary schools. Schools have not been encouraged to work in partnership with the LEA in seeking a borough-wide strategy for reducing the number of exclusions as part of a wider social inclusion strategy.

135. There is no clear continuum of provision for behaviour support, and the work of the services has not been closely allied to school improvement strategies. There is still a considerable overlap between the work of educational psychologists and the behaviour, attendance and exclusions service and schools are unclear about their entitlement. Support is reactive and pupils are slipping through the net. Although individual members have made an impact in some schools, the pupil and school support team (PASS) lacks credibility in secondary schools, and to a certain extent in primary schools.

136. Permanent exclusion rates have come down each year since the last inspection and are lower in both secondary and special schools than nationally. Secondary head teachers are of the firm view that this is largely as a result of their own efforts. The LEA was close to its interim target last year, but monitoring indicates that numbers are on the increase. Fixed term exclusions are almost double the national average in primary and also higher in both secondary and special schools. The levels are reducing, but not fast enough.

137. The criticisms of the first Behaviour Support Plan, published in 1998, have not been addressed. The revision was not carried out as planned and has become a top priority for the contractor following the review of BAES. Currently, the LEA does not have a coherent strategy or make adequate provision for pupils with significant emotional, behavioural and social needs. Insufficient attention has been given to supporting schools in developing an alternative curriculum at Key Stage 4. Good

work has been done in re-engaging disaffected pupils through alternative providers, but demand is currently outstripping supply.

138. Since the transfer of responsibility to the contractor the capacity for further improvement has increased, but staffing issues still have to be resolved and the delegation of the service properly examined. Whilst there is now a strong commitment for behaviour support to be part of a coherent inclusion strategy, plans are at a very early stage.

Recommendations
In order to identify and spread good practice:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• procedures to monitor and evaluate schools' use of the pupil retention grant should be introduced.
In order to reduce fixed term exclusions:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• a coherent strategy for social inclusion should be developed in partnership with schools.
In order to build schools' capacity for managing behaviour:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• funding options should be explored and steps taken to ensure that schools have access to appropriate support through brokerage and service level agreements

Health, safety, welfare and child protection

139. The LEA takes steps to meet its responsibilities for safeguarding the health and safety of pupils and provides schools with clear information and guidance and systems exist for safety problems to be promptly reported by schools. There is a rolling five-year programme to monitor health and safety issues in schools and specific training is offered. Its performance of these functions is satisfactory.

140. The current arrangements for protecting children from significant harm are, however, unsatisfactory. Guidance on the responsibilities of schools in the area child protection committee (ACPC) procedures lacks sufficient detail. The monitoring of designated teachers and their training is weak and working arrangements between teachers and social workers are underdeveloped. These weaknesses are not counterbalanced by the strengths of the training programme.

141. The LEA has previously played an active role in the ACPC, though the LEA officer responsible has recently changed post. The agreed ACPC procedures have been revised and circulated to schools. They contain a specification of the general responsibilities for schools and teachers but lack sufficient detail, especially about the role of the designated teacher or procedures which track the whereabouts of children who are absent from school for long periods and when no notification has been provided by parents. The training provided is generally of good quality and teachers find it helpful, but it is voluntary. The names of schools' designated

teachers are not monitored, neither is the frequency with which they attend training. Senior staff of the social services department recognise that there is much more work to be done in providing a sound basis for effective joint working with education.

142. Providing a service for child protection was originally specified as a direct responsibility of the LEA. However, varying the contract to place responsibility directly with the contractor is now being considered and bringing this to a speedy conclusion is a priority. The Director of Strategy and School Effectiveness is the lead contract manager and has been nominated to take responsibility in this interim period until the contract variation is agreed. Senior staff from the social services department confirm that responsibilities have been maintained and that there is no apparent barrier to working effectively with the contractor. However, schools have only recently been informed of whom they should contact should they require advice on aspects of child protection.

Recommendations

In order to establish a suitable system for protecting children from significant harm:

- decide whether variations are required in the contract regarding responsibility for providing a child protection service, clarify the member of staff at a senior level who will act as the nominated lead officer, and collaborate with social services to devise strategies for promoting better working arrangements between social workers and schools;
- in collaboration with the ACPC, devise supplementary guidance to schools which provides them with detailed information about how they should discharge their responsibilities for protecting children;
- keep an up-to-date list of schools' designated teachers with the dates of their most recent training; and
- in consultation with headteachers, devise and adopt a suitable training policy to ensure that schools have a member of staff confident in managing the requirements of the school's child protection policy.

Children in public care

143. Despite the criticisms in the last report, when it was judged to be poor, the action required to improve support for the education and welfare of children in public care (CiPC) has not, until recently, been a high priority for the LEA. There is still a failure at the highest level to understand fully the concept of corporate parenting. In spite of the commitment and efforts of individuals at the operational level, the provision remains poor. The lack of adequate leadership by senior officers and elected members delayed decisions on the formation of a dedicated, multi-disciplinary CiPC team funded jointly by education and social services, and hampered the ability of the CiPC team to take forward improvements at a fast enough pace.

144. The quality of CiPC data is unsatisfactory, but plans are well advanced to make education and social service databases complementary. The contractor is

working hard to develop a comprehensive database. Nevertheless, little concerted action has been taken to support schools in improving the attainment of children in public care. The percentage of pupils gaining level 4 in English and maths is unacceptably low and, although results rose between 2000 and 2001 the LEA fell short of its target at GCSE. The draft of the second EDP has a separate activity for children in public care in its priority to tackle underachievement, but does not identify precisely what needs to be done to raise standards. Personal education plans have been piloted successfully and should be in place for all pupils by Easter 2002. This will enable the progress of individual pupils to be tracked and for realistic targets to be set, but the LEA is a year behind the target set in the Quality Protects plan.

145. The CiPC team is now beginning to operate effectively. It brings together a wide range of expertise across social services, education and the youth service and is working effectively to address identified weaknesses. The introduction of a joint framework and joint training has established a common language and shared understanding. Satisfactory links have been established with social services at an operational level. The LEA is now in a position to identify where educational provision is being made for almost all children, although it does not monitor out-borough provision at present.

146. Inconsistent practice among social workers means that communication with schools is still not always timely enough. Links at a strategic level have been hampered by discontinuity of personnel but are now improving. A satisfactory training programme for designated teachers has been implemented and most schools are clear about their role and responsibilities and those of the CiPC team. Young people have been consulted in order to improve support and training and there are plans to celebrate their achievements publicly. The complementary expertise of the members of the CiPC team is enabling it to forge ahead on a number of fronts and to establish good working relationships with other services and agencies. However, without a stronger lead at both corporate and departmental levels, the capacity for further improvement is not secure.

Recommendation

In order to ensure that the LEA fulfils its corporate parenting responsibilities:

- elected members and senior officers should undertake training; and
- robust monitoring procedures should be introduced.

Measures to combat racism

147. Provision was satisfactory at the time of the last inspection and the LEA's self evaluation judges that it is still satisfactory. No detailed inspection work was done in this area but evidence emerged from the inspection of other functions that there has been satisfactory progress. The work of the education department is ahead of other council departments in its support for minority ethnic pupils. Recent legislation has

been communicated well to schools and their responsibilities made clear. An audit has been undertaken in the education service and in schools in order to inform the comprehensive equalities action plan required to meet the Commission for Race Equality's standards. However, council departments appear to be working in isolation and there is little evidence to suggest that local minority ethnic communities have been involved in developing corporate policy.

SECTION 5: CORPORATE ISSUES

Introduction to corporate issues

148. The poor corporate leadership and management of education remain a matter of serious concern. These issues have been identified clearly and have been reported in both the previous LEA inspection report (1999) and the Audit Commission's corporate governance inspection report (2001). Substantial external support has been provided to drive improvement across the authority following the Audit Commission report. This takes the form of a newly established independent supervisory board which will oversee the effectiveness of a tailored package of support provided by the Audit Commission and the Improvement Development Agency (IdeA). This package focuses on working with members and officers to develop a new constitution; on developing the strategic capacity and capability of the member and officer groups; and engaging lead members in establishing a member-officer protocol and an effective standards committee. In view of these developments, the inspection team have not set specific and separate recommendations detailing the ways in which the corporate management of the authority should be improved and have restricted our recommendations to those which are specific to the education service. However, continued monitoring of progress will be required to ensure that the unprecedented level of support leads to the speedy improvements which are urgently required.

Corporate planning

149. The clarity, consistency and coherence of strategic corporate plans are poor. Plans are produced on a piecemeal basis and there are no key dates identified for review and evaluation of the action taken. Objectives that are set in different plans are not consistently compatible and are not developed into detailed and effective service plans. This leads to confusion about the priorities, reduces strategic capacity and makes it difficult to identify whether education is a key strategic priority of the council. These weaknesses result in the corporate agenda being dominated by responses to pressures, inspection reports and new initiatives that originate externally.

Recommendation

In order to improve the quality of strategic planning:

- establish effective planning processes which ensure that strategic priorities are developed into clear operational proposals within service plans.

150. There is, as yet, no community plan. The local strategic partnership (LSP) is still embryonic and discussions to date have focused more on structure and membership rather than function. The understanding that the Community Plan is important in facilitating local public service agreements (LPSAs) is not widely developed. Discussions within the local strategic partnership have centred on the establishment and role of district committees and district strategic fora. It is intended that the established authority-wide consultative arrangements with schools will interface with

the LSP through the Walsall lifelong learning alliance which has wide representation from across the educational community. However, it is not clear how these consultative arrangements will be affected by the new district structures.

151. Most corporate documentation makes reference to the importance of education. There is political understanding of the contribution educational activities and skills acquisition make to the regeneration agenda. Revenue expenditure patterns confirm the council's commitment to education. However, the priority for education is not always clearly developed in key strategic plans. The priorities established in the corporate plan are not entirely compatible with the objectives detailed in the EDP and the links between them are not clearly drawn. The corporate plan refers to three educational objectives. Whilst these objectives are drawn from the EDP and Lifelong Learning plan, the omission of specific reference to the importance of the EDP and its priorities within the corporate plan reduces the probability that the whole authority can contribute to major educational objectives.

152. Procedures for implementing and evaluating corporate plans are poorly developed. In the absence of an effective scrutiny function, members are not sufficiently engaged in evaluating the impact of corporate plans. Good practice is not shared across the authority and the strategic executive team (SET) does not systematically receive performance information. Although the Best Value Performance Plan contains performance indicators and they are monitored, audited and used for benchmark purposes, they are not used to drive improvement.

Decision making

153. The authority is poorly prepared to take decisions effectively. Many decisions have been subject to delay. There is an extensive backlog of tasks which compete for urgent attention. In such circumstances, important decisions are taken without having been given the consideration they deserve, and without appropriate consultation.

154. Political structures do not assist effective decision-making. Education and community services committee agendas are long and meetings are relatively short, inhibiting a sustained focus on key priorities. The climate and culture of planning and review by this committee recommended by the previous LEA inspection has not been established. Scrutiny of decision taking is unclear and insufficiently well developed. The authority has established a children and young people's scrutiny committee on an experimental basis but meetings have been irregular and short. There has been no discernible outcome and the committee has so far failed to report any findings formally. This is poor in view of the legal requirement for implementing revisions to local government from July 2002.

155. Papers presented to the education and community services committee contain a plethora of information, are complex and difficult to access and the opportunity is not always taken by officers to highlight the key implications for policy and practice. Training and awareness-raising sessions for elected members on major educational issues have been provided, but attendance has been low. The director provides regular briefings for leading education members.

156. The delegation of powers to the director of education is minimal and undoubtedly contributes to the size of committee agendas. This in turn makes prioritisation of strategic decision taking within committees more difficult as important strategic papers are interleaved with the more mundane. There is evidence that low levels of financial delegation have stopped action being taken with the speed which officers considered necessary. Unfortunately, even within political groups, there appears to be no agreement on the appropriate level of delegation. The matter is under consideration by the group of ten members that are working with the IDeA on the development of a modernised constitution.

The leadership of elected members

157. Members offer limited strategic direction and do not play a key role in monitoring performance. There is little understanding of how to turn areas of interest and concern into policy. The Audit Commission's report on corporate governance identified that the relationships between officers and members are not based on mutual trust and respect. There have been examples of inappropriate behaviour, but recognition that the behaviour of some members has been unacceptable is not universally shared. In general, too many governors and headteachers who contributed to this inspection still saw elected members as an impediment to progress.

158. Leading members for education are anxious to demonstrate that they work co-operatively and that a more collaborative climate is developing. Members of the education monitoring working group and stakeholder forum confirmed that there has been an improvement, and that the three lead education members are trying to work together. However, two of the three lead members for education do not engage with any strategic corporate work. Similarly, the group leaders of the two parties that control the council delegate responsibility for education matters to their lead members. This separation of the corporate and education portfolios, and the lack of mutual engagement in the two agendas, makes corporate approaches and development more difficult to sustain.

The leadership of officers

159. The challenge for officers of providing effective leadership in Walsall should not be underestimated. Political control of the authority has occasionally been extreme. The level of temporary vacancies and the number of issues vying for urgent attention have made prioritisation difficult. Officers are forced to spend a great deal of time seeking to create a consensus around constitutional issues; time which could be better spent on strategic planning, monitoring and effecting continuous improvement in services. Nevertheless, progress in that leadership has been too slow since the last inspection

160. There has been a complete turnover of all members of the senior management team and a new director of education was appointed a year ago. The education and community directorate has been restructured into four main divisions, with an additional fifth area of school effectiveness and strategic management directly managed by the contractor. This is a comparatively large team for the size of the

authority but it reflects the daunting agenda for change that faces the LEA and the wider community portfolio.

161. The current senior management team is very new and has not had time to demonstrate its capacity for effective strategic leadership and management. While all senior managers have now been appointed, one took up post only one month before the inspection and another has still to take up post. Nevertheless, there are longstanding issues of significant concern regarding services retained by the LEA, where there is insufficient evidence of action; particularly in the areas of SEN and social inclusion. Moreover, the self-evaluation conducted by the LEA failed to recognise the severity of some of these issues. In view of the serious weaknesses in three of the four major functions of the LEA, the overall leadership of senior officers is poor.

162. The director's major priority in his first year has been developing relationships with schools and winning their confidence. Schools generally considered that relationships with officers had improved in the last year. The transfer of responsibilities to the contractor has been well managed. Under the terms of the contract, the director is intended to link with the council's wider policies and determine how the service can best assist the council in delivering its key statutory duty of promoting the social, economic and environmental well-being of its community. However, minutes of the education and community management team (ECMT) illustrate that decisions have dealt primarily with educational and managerial rather than strategic matters.

Recommendation

In order to improve the quality of strategic leadership and management:

- take steps to ensure that the work of the ECMT focuses on planning and development at a strategic level.

163. The retention of SEN and aspects of inclusion within the services provided by the LEA requires very detailed protocols to be reached with the contractor in terms of pupil support, behaviour and inclusion. However, the shape and scope of these protocols have yet to be determined. During the early phases of the contract, close working between the parties has shown a willingness to focus on service delivery rather than on the fine print of the contract. The Partnering Board, established as part of the contract, includes representation from both the LEA and the contractor and is designed to quickly resolve any difficulties, should they arise. Monitoring reports on the performance of the contract cover both the contractor and the services that still reside with the LEA. As a consequence, the report is holistic, but monitoring so far has been perfunctory. There is a dearth of evidence in relation to the effectiveness of plans and of evaluation being embedded in the culture of the education service. Moreover, evaluative criteria on stakeholder satisfaction with the contract have still to be negotiated and consulted upon.

Recommendation

In order to improve the quality of the monitoring of the contract:

- improve the depth, detail and rigour of the quarterly monitoring of the contract; and
- develop and consult upon measures to determine the level of satisfaction of schools and customers with the contracted services.

Partnership

164. The LEA and strategic partner have demonstrated a willingness to enter into and support a number of productive partnerships. Several work well, and are benefiting working arrangements and provision at the point of delivery. However, in some areas, most notably health, there has been a lack of a strategic analysis of the overall impact of partnerships and how they may affect and enhance services. This lack of a clear strategic framework is reducing the potential benefits of effective partnership working.

165. Collaborative working with the health authority has suffered as a consequence of long term vacancies in parts of the education service and restructuring of health provision. Nevertheless, there are examples of good practice which have positively impacted on schools. A Sure Start plus partnership has involved good joint working between the college, health, schools, social services, housing benefits, Connexions, and a local childminding service. Resources from the Standards Fund have ensured that young mothers stay in education and progress beyond 16.

166. Disappointment was expressed at the level of commitment which the authority showed in establishing an effective partnership under the Crime and Disorder Act. The school survey indicated a deterioration in the effectiveness of liaison with the police. The Neighbourhood Renewal partnership has been effective in terms of relationships. Education targets in the plan refer to education base documents but lack the clarity and specificity that would enable other partners to understand how they might contribute to tangible outcomes in schools.

167. There are some examples of effective partnership working within and beyond the borough. In conjunction with the Walsall lifelong learning alliance and the Black Country Learning and Skills Council (LSC), Walsall is endeavouring to develop common management information systems to allow monitoring of shared targets. A joint action plan from the LEA and the Black Country LSC was drawn up in response to the OFSTED area-wide 16-19 inspection. It has been used to inform other councils within the LSC area and was an important and positive element in informing the consultations that have been launched on the second EDP.

168. The Early Years partnership is well structured and this is reflected in a focused development plan which has clearly defined medium and long-term targets. The drug education strategy for the borough seeks to ensure consistency of advice from youth

workers, school nurses and those dealing with drug related incidents, and has developed effective partnerships with several voluntary organisations.

APPENDIX 1: RECOMMENDATIONS

The inspection team assume that the authority will continue to co-operate with the Audit Commission and the IdeA and the following recommendations are contingent upon this being so.

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

- Ensure a link between performance management and budget management within the directorate and implement the necessary training for service managers.
- Improve the capacity and capability of the personnel support service and update the personnel manual for schools to ensure that it reflects the most recent legislation.
- Identify resources and work to secure maximum external investment in order to support urgent improvements to the condition of school buildings detailed in the asset management plan.
- Provide a coherent strategy for social inclusion which establishes a clear framework for planning at a strategic level and clarifies the respective roles and responsibilities of schools and the relevant services.
- Ensure that elected members are well briefed and have a clear understanding of their statutory responsibilities in relation to vulnerable pupils.
- Ensure that the quality of data on underachieving groups is improved and rigorous monitoring procedures are introduced across all departments in order to identify needs and target resources more effectively.
- Address the serious weaknesses identified in the section 10 report on the pupil referral unit for school phobics.
- Establish a suitable system for protecting children from significant harm, as detailed in section four of this report.
- Provide training on corporate parenting responsibilities for elected members and senior officers.

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

- Establish effective processes for strategic planning which ensure that strategic priorities are developed into clear operational proposals within service plans.
- Ensure that the work of the ECMT focuses on planning and development at a strategic level.

- Improve the depth, detail and rigour of the quarterly monitoring of the contract with the contractor.
- Develop and consult upon the measures to determine the level of satisfaction of schools and customers with the contracted services.
- Collate and provide comprehensive and reliable data for schools on minority ethnic pupils, including Travellers and establish targets in the second EDP that will enable achievement to be measured.
- Provide robust data and benchmarking information for schools and secure training and support for their interpretation and use at senior and middle management levels.
- Negotiate a variation in the contract which identifies clearly the sources of funding for the support of gifted and talented pupils, and the respective roles and responsibilities within the partnership.
- Offer model personnel policies to schools and ensure regular updates are circulated to all schools.
- Improve the policy and strategy for special educational needs, as detailed in section three of this report.
- Develop coherent systems that will enhance schools' capacity and capability for managing special educational needs, as detailed in section three of this report.
- Improve the management of the support services for special educational needs so that schools receive a consistent standard of support, as detailed in section three of this report.
- Improve the value for money which is provided by the SEN budget, as detailed in section three of this report.
- Ensure that pupils excluded for more than 15 days receive effective provision that can meet statutory requirements by September 2002. Reduce the time that any pupil waits for provision to no more than four weeks, and publish a costed plan with specific timescales.
- Implement procedures for monitoring the quality and effectiveness of provision for all pupils educated otherwise than at school.
- Reduce fixed term exclusions in partnership with schools.

We also make the following recommendations:

- Ensure that corporate recharges to the education directorate are subject to agreed standards in terms of specifications, activity and costs, and involve service level agreements where appropriate.

- Ensure that completed Best Value reviews and their action plans are approved by relevant members as outlined in the authority's Best Value preparation pack.
- Facilitate joint working and secure the efficient transfer of data between primary and secondary schools.
- Ensure more is done to promote and support schools in becoming autonomous resource and budget managers.
- Ensure schools fulfil the requirement to submit an annual Best Value statement.
- Monitor, evaluate and disseminate schools' use of the pupil retention grant.
- Ensure schools have appropriate access to behaviour support through brokerage and service level agreements.

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