



**OFFICE FOR STANDARDS
IN EDUCATION**

**INSPECTION OF
SWINDON
LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

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**OFFICE OF HER MAJESTY'S CHIEF INSPECTOR OF SCHOOLS
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INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection 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*, which focuses on the effectiveness of local education authority (LEA) work to support school improvement. The inspection also took account of the Local Government Act 1999, insofar as it relates to work undertaken by the LEA on Best Value.
2. The inspection was partly based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA, on school inspection information and audit reports, on documentation and discussions with LEA elected members, staff in the directorate for education and community and in other council departments and with representatives of the LEA's partners. In addition, a questionnaire seeking the views on aspects of the LEA's work was circulated to all schools. The response rate was 77 per cent.
3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to 12 primary schools, four secondary and two special schools. The visits tested the views of governors, headteachers and other staff on the key aspects of the LEA's strategy. The visits also considered whether the support that is provided by the LEA contributes, where appropriate, to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in the school, and provides value for money. Further evidence was considered from the inspection of the literacy and numeracy strategies in another six primary schools.

COMMENTARY

4. Swindon is a new local education authority which was formed in 1997. Over recent years, its population has increased rapidly and Swindon will continue to be one of the fastest growing areas nationally. In contrast to the buoyancy of the local economy, funding for public services is based on an historically low standard spending assessment. The LEA has faced exceptional challenges because of the combination of a small central staff, low funding and considerable local variations in social and economic circumstances. It has to plan for an exceptional growth in school places in some parts of the borough, while managing a contraction in other areas. It also has to meet the needs of the high proportion of its schools which are in difficulties.

5. Standards in the core subjects at Key Stage 2 are about average and are improving in line with the national trend. However, at GCSE, attainment is below national averages and the rate of improvement is well below the national trend. Primary and secondary schools' last OFSTED section 10 inspections show a picture of greater under-performance than that nationally. Standards were judged good or very good in a significantly lower proportion of schools. The number of schools requiring special measures has increased since 1997.

6. High ambitions and a sense of optimism that the small LEA would work in closer partnership with schools heralded the formation of the LEA. However, the LEA has made too little progress in developing the sound strategic foundation and the partnership with schools which are necessary to realise this ambition. There is no doubting the goodwill of the council, particularly toward supporting more vulnerable pupils. There can be little doubt, either, of elected members' aspirations for Swindon or of the importance they attach to raising standards of attainment. However, they have failed to establish the transparent and effective decision-making structures that would enable them to translate high ambitions into reality. Difficult decisions have had to be taken. The reasons for arriving at them have not always been clear to schools. This, together with the frequent failure to use funding to best effect, has engendered a climate of mistrust. Schools do not believe that consultation influences decision making. Their trust in elected members has been damaged, perhaps more than is entirely warranted, by the belief that members interfere too much and that officers lack the ability to protect the interest of education.

7. In relation to education and, in particular, schools, the council has not been well served by its senior officers; this is only partly explicable by the fact that there are too few of them with too many roles to perform. The principal weaknesses are strategic management and planning which are poor or very poor in most areas. In many respects, plans, notably for school places, asset management, special educational needs, behaviour, the recruitment and retention of teachers and information and communication technology attempt to comply with national requirements but they are often over-bureaucratic and impracticable. They fail to interpret intentions into a clear, manageable sequence of actions which anticipate the possible consequences. The plans do not provide schools with a coherent way forward nor enable headteachers confidently to see the place of the individual school in relation to the overall plan for the authority. The chief executive's department has developed systems for planning and improving the quality of services across the

council but these have not been successful in bringing about improvement or in initiating any review of the strategic capacity of the education department.

8. The LEA does not effectively support school improvement. Rather it impedes it by engaging schools in lengthy consultation and by not specifying clearly enough its role, thereby obscuring the essential accountabilities. It has failed to communicate effectively its strategy for removing surplus places and manage the expansion in other areas, and in that, has created confusion and uncertainty. In relation to the special educational needs strategy and provision of behaviour support - key functions of an LEA - Swindon is performing unsatisfactorily. All in all, the partnership with schools is far from secure. There is a high level of confusion, suspicion and mistrust which is consuming headteachers' energies and deflecting them from their essential task of raising standards in their schools. Relationships with teacher unions are, however, reported to be more productive.

9. Some services and individuals continue to provide support which is well regarded and at least satisfactory. However, the impact of these services is reduced by the lack of a strong strategic foundation, and this prevents them having a more pervasive influence on raising standards in schools. The overall effectiveness of support was judged satisfactory in half the schools visited. The LEA performs only one third of the functions inspected satisfactorily. The following functions are discharged well:

- the strategy and support for early years education;
- financial support services;
- the provision and use of performance data;
- the strategy and support for literacy;
- support to school governors;
- support to raise the attainment of children in public care; and
- support for Travellers' children.

The following are unsatisfactory:

- the Education Development Plan and its implementation in secondary schools;
- the extent to which the LEA targets resources to priorities;
- the extent to which the LEA has in place structures for achieving Best Value;
- the extent to which LEA support is focused on areas of greatest need;
- the provision of monitoring, challenge, intervention and support to schools;
- the effectiveness of services to support school improvement;
- the strategy and support for the development of information and communication technology for the curriculum and school administration;
- support to schools causing concern;
- the clarity and consistency of corporate plans and their implementation;
- the speed, openness and effectiveness of decision making;
- the leadership of elected members and the advice which they receive;
- the leadership of senior officers;
- property services and asset management planning;
- the strategy and support for special educational needs;
- the provision of school places;

- the strategy for improving behaviour and discipline in schools; and
- the strategy for education otherwise than at school.

10. The LEA as a whole has not established itself as an effective organisation. The quality of leadership given by elected members and senior officers is poor, as are their strategic management and planning. The response to Best Value is deficient. There are weaknesses, often serious, in many aspects of the LEA's provision. A recent attempt to develop a five year strategic plan for education in consultation with schools has not been successful in engaging schools, laying to rest some of the difficulties of the recent past or providing the LEA with a clear enough way forward. The LEA's capacity and capability for further improvement is poor and it will need immediate assistance to implement the recommendations of this report.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

11. Swindon local authority was formed in 1997. For 23 years before this, the LEA was part of Wiltshire County Council and before that it was an excepted district which operated its own education service. Swindon is a rapidly growing area which has doubled in population in the last 50 years and is projected to continue to be one of the fastest growing areas nationally.

12. Social and economic diversity is great within what is a relatively small, compact area. Most of the population live in the town of Swindon, with a minority living in the rural communities which surround the town. Overall, the LEA ranks about average on socio-economic indicators but two wards rank among the most disadvantaged nationally. The percentage of pupils who are eligible for free school meals is below the national averages. However, Swindon enjoys high employment and as a result the rate of free school meals does not provide an accurate indication of educational need.

13. Swindon maintains 66 primary schools, ten secondary schools, six special schools and one pupil referral unit. Four out of ten secondary schools were previously grant maintained and two secondary schools have sixth forms. Most students who stay on in education post-16 attend either a sixth form college or college of further education.

14. The percentage of pupils with statements of special educational need is in line with national statistics, but the percentage of secondary aged pupils who attend special schools is higher than the national average. In January 2000, 13 per cent of three and four-year-olds attend maintained nursery schools and classes, and 46 per cent attend nursery and infant classes in primary schools compared with 30 and 58 per cent respectively nationally. In 1998-1999 the percentage of pupils who stayed on in education post-16 was below average at 65 and 49 per cent of 16 and 17 year olds respectively compared with 70 and 57 per cent nationally.

Performance

15. Standards at Key Stage 2 are sound and in National Curriculum assessments are in line with the national average; improvement in core subjects is also satisfactory. However, OFSTED section 10 inspections show that standards across the curriculum require some or significant improvement in a higher percentage of primary schools than the percentage of schools nationally.

16. Standards in secondary schools are weaker than those in primary schools and are unsatisfactory, particularly at Key Stage 4. The statistics point to a relative deterioration in standards at GCSE which are overall below average. The percentage of pupils gaining one or more passes at A*-G grade at GCSE and pupils' average points scores are below the national averages. Improvement has not kept pace with national rate of improvement.

17. In the schools' latest OFSTED inspections, standards achieved by 43 and 45¹ per cent of primary and secondary schools respectively were judged good or very good compared with 52 and 57 per cent nationally. Overall, 65 and 64 per cent of primary schools and secondary schools were rated good or very good overall compared with 70 and 67 per cent nationally.

18. Since 1997, there has been a significant increase in the number of schools requiring special measures. Six schools have required special measures. In two instances, either the school has closed or special measures have been removed in a timely way. Since 1998, a further seven schools have been judged to have serious weaknesses. Two schools, a primary and a secondary school, have been awarded beacon status.

19. Attendance is in line with national averages. The rate of permanent exclusion is lower than national statistics in primary and secondary schools. However, the number of pupils receiving support for behaviour from the pupil referral unit is very high.

Funding

20. Swindon LEA plans to spend £80m on education in 2001-02, just at the level of the education standard spending assessment (SSA). In 2000-01, the latest year for which an analysis is available, Swindon's SSA per pupil was in the lowest one-sixth nationally. In that year, Swindon planned to spend above its SSA (£77.5m compared to the SSA of £77.3m) for the first time. In the previous two years, its expenditure as a percentage of SSA had been 99.5 and 99 per cent. In the current year, the LEA plans to delegate 86.7 per cent of the Local Schools Budget (LSB) through the Individual Schools Budget (ISB). This compares with a planned 85.4 per cent in 2000-01.

21. On a per pupil basis, Swindon's planned total expenditure within the LSB (£2503) in 2000-01 was below that of similar authorities² (£2626) and the average for unitary LEAs (£2675). However, LEA activities within the LSB non-delegated budget were planned to cost less in Swindon, £354 compared to £411 in statistical neighbours and £427 in unitary authorities. Despite that, the LEA's average funding per pupil delegated to primary and secondary schools through the ISB was consistently lower than that for comparable authorities (see table below). Special school delegation per pupil was lower than national and higher than statistical neighbour averages. In addition, Swindon received standards fund grant which was, per pupil, marginally above that of its statistical neighbours, although below national averages. It delegates a much higher proportion to schools. Preliminary analyses of figures for 2001-2002 show comparisons broadly similar to those for last year.

¹ These percentages are calculated on the basis of inspections of 11 secondary schools; one secondary school has recently closed.

² Swindon's similar authorities include Telford and Wrekin, The City of Peterborough, Torbay, Isle of Wight, Poole, Medway, Northamptonshire, Warrington, York, South Gloucestershire.

2000-01	Primary ISB per pupil	Secondary ISB per pupil	Special ISB per pupil	Standards Fund per pupil Devolved	Standards Fund per pupil Non-devolved
Swindon	£1,718	£2,375	£8,155	163	15
Statistical Neighbours	£1,773	£2,480	£7,963	132	40
English LEAs	£1,869	£2,559	£9,357	156	54

22. Central costs per pupil for strategic management including statutory and regulatory duties were low in Swindon (£62) in comparison with the average for similar authorities (£95) or unitary authorities (£101). Capital expenditure per pupil (£86) was about forty per cent of the average for similar authorities (£214) and national averages (£207). The cost of school improvement including the education development plan (EDP) was relatively high (£30: £22: £24) as was home to school transport (£95: £66: £69), compared with similar authorities and national averages.

23. The LEA's central costs of provision for pupils with statements, for specialist support to pupils without statements and for education out of school are low in comparison with similar authorities and unitary authority averages. The comparable costs for pupil referral units and placements in independent special schools are high.

Council structure

24. The council has 59 elected members. Since May 2000, no party has had an overall majority. Last year, 23 new members were elected to the council. At the same time a new political decision-making structure was piloted in line with proposals for the modernisation of local government. This has led to a structure which includes a fairly large cabinet of ten, as well as a ratification committee and two policy and scrutiny commissions. In addition, 24 other short-term committees and task groups were established.

25. This structure has not worked well. Members' discussion of the strategic issues facing education was inadequate and fragmented. The agenda and accompanying papers which were prepared for discussion by the cabinet show comparatively little discussion about educational issues. The cabinet did not evolve into a sufficiently strategic decision-making group which considered the development of policies across the council. The scrutiny committee had difficulties establishing a suitable work programme.

26. The structure has changed in 2001. An education and culture commission has been formed that will consider all major educational initiatives in much the same way as the education committee before modernisation. One scrutiny committee has been formed. The remit of this committee is very large, although it has already developed a more promising structure of sub-groups to take forward its work. While this new structure helps to ensure that appropriate educational issues will be considered by members, it has not necessarily developed the principles of

transparent and timely decision-making and the reduction of bureaucracy which are at the heart of modernisation.

The Education Development Plan

27. The Education Development Plan (EDP) has more weaknesses than strengths. These weaknesses have become more apparent during the three years in which the plan has been in operation. The plan does not clearly identify the activities that are the most important and feasible for a small LEA to manage effectively. Eight priorities have been identified, which in view of the capacity of the education services are too many. The priorities are:

- literacy;
- numeracy;
- special educational needs;
- early years;
- curriculum enrichment;
- school self-review;
- information and communications technology; and
- more able and gifted pupils.

28. Some of the planned activities have the potential to bring about improvement, but overall the plans are too ambitious and fail to identify for schools a clear way forward. Attempts have been made to clarify the planning, but these have not been successful. The schools recognise the priorities of the plan, but do not regard the plan as an essential working document or as providing a clear strategic approach to school improvement. Moreover, it contains no clear strategy to raise standards in secondary or special schools.

Recommendation

Identify, in partnership with representatives from secondary schools, a limited number of activities that can help schools to meet their targets. Develop a clear, sequenced and practicable strategy for the improvement of secondary schools which can be included in the Education Development Plan 2002.

29. Unusually, the plan was developed by a member working party with the intention of ensuring that members increased their understanding of educational developments. Although schools were represented on the working party and all the schools were consulted, the opportunity which developing this plan provided for this small new authority to engage its schools in partnership and develop a shared agenda for school improvement has largely been missed.

30. The targets for 2002 are challenging for English and mathematics at Key Stage 2, although less so for GCSE. Nonetheless, if reached, they will represent a significant improvement. The costs which are allocated to implement the plan, are not insignificant when related to the number of schools and should be sufficient to ensure that they have a good level of support.

Implementation of the Education Development Plan

31. Regular monitoring of the implementation of the actions in the plan is reported to the relevant scrutiny committee and shows reasonable progress, with the exception of the priority for special educational needs where there has been significant slippage. A much higher allocation of resources is deployed to this priority; therefore the lack of progress is a matter of concern. The monitoring is very general and is not rigorously based on assessing progress against success criteria or on clearly identifying slippage. Schools are not involved sufficiently in monitoring of the activities which are undertaken and especially in evaluating their impact on school improvement. The monitoring has not lead to strategies to accelerate progress when slippage has occurred or to refocusing of activities in the light of the findings.

Recommendation

Improve the monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the Education Development Plan so that it focuses more clearly on fewer key activities. To inform the development of the new EDP, identify a small range of key activities – such as target-setting, monitoring and challenge, literacy, numeracy, school self-review, information and communication technology and the Improving Schools in Swindon project and seek information on their impact on improving standards in schools.

32. Schools accept the support related to EDP priorities when it is offered, but they are not clear what is available or how to access it for themselves. Primary schools have benefited from the support much more than secondary and special schools. As this report shows, priorities such as special educational needs, information and communication technology (ICT) and more able and gifted children have insufficient impact on raising standards.

33. Targets in the EDP have been met and exceeded for mathematics at Key Stage 2 in 2000 and results in English have fallen marginally short of the target for 2000. Much more worrying is the rate of progress toward meeting GCSE targets. While the target for average points score has virtually been met, there is a considerable shortfall of 3.2 per cent and 1.5 per cent in reaching the target for the percentage of pupils achieving five or more subjects at grades A*-C and one or more subjects at A*-G grade at GCSE respectively. There has been no obvious approach to making up the shortfall and devising strategies that will accelerate progress.

The allocation of resources to priorities

34. Swindon does not target its resources effectively to its priorities. Despite members' and officers' intentions to give a high priority to education, Swindon's budget is at the lower end of most comparators. The percentage of delegation to schools, however, is in line with comparable averages. Within the education service, there are still too many budget decisions that are difficult to understand, examples of inaccurate planning, a lack of consideration of effects of the distribution of resources on schools and variance between projections and out-turns.

35. Swindon has spent below SSA in three of the four years since its formation and that alone, given a relatively low SSA, has caused constraints in schools and the education department. The situation has been compounded by the requirement on Swindon to make good an interval in pensions contributions taken by the predecessor council, Wiltshire, in the early 1990s. A contributory annual charge for this is included in the expenditure against the SSA and, in effect, reduced the operational value of the education service budget by that amount (£1.8m, just over two per cent of the total in 2000-2001). The charge has been reduced to £0.8m in 2001-02 as a result of a one-off payment made by the council to the pension fund from capital receipts. The £1.0m saved has not been passed on to schools. The large majority of schools argue that they had been led to believe that it would be; nor has the saving been passed to other parts of the education service. This has deeply damaged the LEA's relations with schools.

36. There is a further serious consequence. The Secretary of State wrote to the leader of Swindon Council in March 2001. He expressed disappointment that all the additional funding in the education SSA for 2001-02 was not being made available to education and that the five per cent increase in delegated funding compared with the previous year would not be met. Despite this letter, the education service did not receive the full benefit of the increase in education SSA and schools did not receive an additional five per cent increase in the level of delegation.

37. Schools are also confused by the council's apparent ability to find additional funds late in the planning cycle. Recently, these include around £186,000 to boost the ISB (and thereby the LSB to the SSA level) and close to £400,000 to be divided between four secondary schools in which standards most need to improve. The latter was found from resources originally intended but not needed to take up additional Standards Fund allocations should they become available, recycled savings from a secondary school closure and an advance on next year's budget of £40,000. This causes particular concern to primary schools, who believe that, in effect, they contributed to the Standards Fund budget by forging an element of the potential ISB. Schools generally seem unaware of the £40,000 'loan element'.

38. The age weighted pupil unit (AWPU) generates less per pupil at all key stages than in similar authorities. The gap is greatest at Key Stage 1 (£106), reduces at each key stage and is least at Key Stage 4 (£23). Headteachers of primary schools, in particular, do not know what rationale, if any, lies behind the distribution across key stages. Not only is the AWPU in total relatively small in Swindon primary schools, it is also, in comparison with other LEAs, a smaller proportion of the ISB. It follows, that since the AWPU (with some lump sums) is the only guaranteed funding for all schools, then schools which do not benefit from formula aspects of the ISB will have greater difficulty balancing their budgets. There is no evidence that the impact and consequences of the distribution on pupils' achievement have been considered. Shortcomings in Special Educational Needs budget planning are described in Section 4.

Recommendation

Improve the transparency of budgetary decisions so that these fulfil the council's priority for education by:

- *conducting an open, rigorous review of current spending and future needs in the education service, in anticipation of the budget setting for 2002-03, engaging schools as active partners in that process;*
- *ensuring that spending on and within the education budgets for 2002-03 reflects priorities which have explicitly endorsed;*
- *start work to ensure that each element of the budget which is passed to schools is clear to elected members, officers and schools, and is based on up to date data and a rationale that is agreed with schools. This work should inform the construction of the formula from April 2003; and*
- *ensuring that the basis of the apportionment of central charges to budgets accurately reflects activity and true costs.*

39. Planning for the education department's budget is unsatisfactory and leads to significant over or under-expenditure on individual budget lines. However, overall monitoring of these budgets is good and the Education and Community Services Budget does not 'at the bottom line' have significant variances. Balanced budgets at this level seem to be the reason why senior officers and members do not scrutinise individual budget lines effectively. The department has recurring difficulty with key SEN budgets and the associated transport budget, although the latter was predicted to underspend by close to ten per cent in the past financial year. The council's budget for the STEAM museum was forecast to overspend by £411,000 with visitor numbers at only a half of those predicted, creating a further strain on education & community service finances. Other variances across budgets in both years indicate continual difficulty with accurate planning. Central recharges appear high and are approximately 18 per cent of the budget for LEA activities within the LSB. These are apportioned *pro rata* across the Section 52 headings which gives a misleading impression about actual service costs and, on occasion, amounts to be delegated.

40. Schools are given predictions and other information about their budget share in reasonable time. Despite, or perhaps because of, the relatively low ISB, no schools report an end of year deficit and some have unacceptably high surpluses. This may be misleading because schools account on a cash basis and do not allow for debts incurred but not paid before the year end. Each school submits a statement to the LEA outlining the planned use of the closing balance.

Recommendation

Improve the management of school budgets so that schools achieve balanced budgets by:

- *providing advice to schools on resource management including financial benchmark data; and*
- *reporting annually to members and to schools on the trends in school reserves and the use, if any, of those reserves to balance school budgets.*

Best Value

41. The council is not achieving Best Value in the services it provides to schools and it is not adequately discharging its statutory duty to ensure Best Value within the education service. The council's Best Value Performance Plan was approved without qualification by the external auditors. It has set out a framework for the timing and operation of each Best Value Review supported by training and other resources. A recent inspection by the Best Value Inspection Service of the Best Value Review of information and communication technology was broadly favourable. In addition, the European Foundation Quality Model for self assessment is widely sponsored across the council services. Performance management is expected of all services and there is encouragement to apply for Investors in People status which the education department had begun before this inspection. However, there has been little realistic consideration of the workload and strategic capacity which are required to conduct effectively and make use of, all these valuable models for service improvement.

42. Despite good intentions, Best Value Reviews and other quality processes are not achieving the required improvements. The initial scheduling of Best Value Reviews is not helpful. An already stretched education department faced an unmanageable workload, with all major services planned for review in the first year of the Best Value Performance Plan. The timetable has been rescheduled, but the rationale for this is not clear, since the services identified for reviews are not consistently those which are high cost or are a priority for improvement. Furthermore, the identification of the broad areas for review largely follows a traditional service organisation and does not give sufficient consideration to the issues which the council needs to consider as a priority. Efficient use is not made of Best Value requirements, for instance, to inform the implementation and evaluation of major strategic plans. Efforts are, therefore, not sufficiently focused because reviews in addition to Best Value are being commissioned in areas where developments are most needed such as special educational needs.

Recommendation

Review the schedule for conducting Best Value Reviews within education so that reviews focus on services and functions that are in urgent need of improvement.

43. Reviews have not been completed to schedule. Four Best Value Reviews in education were scheduled to be completed by March 2001 for governor support services, home tuition, parent partnership and education welfare service. The latter was not completed for sensible reasons because the LEA had at its disposal the findings of a recent value for money study conducted by the District Audit in the same service area. At the time of this inspection, the review of home tuition had still not been completed. Reviews of the parent partnership and governors support service were virtually complete, but had not been considered by the relevant scrutiny committee. Therefore, this inspection was unable to inspect these reviews.

Recommendation

Ensure that Best Value Reviews are completed to deadlines.

44. Challenge, competition and consultation are not being rigorously applied in the process of conducting Best Value Reviews. Outsourcing and brokerage have not been seriously considered as a way to help a small LEA with limited resources. Schools are critical of the LEA's performance in advising on services from other providers, on ways of ensuring that they obtain value for money from service providers and of their involvement in the review of LEA services. Few schools have any recollection of involvement in service review, except for the completion of questionnaires in which they have little confidence and from which they receive little analysis or other feedback.

Recommendation

Consult with schools to identify and implement an approach to education-related Best Value Reviews in which schools have a clear sense of responsibility and opportunity to contribute to identifying strategies to improve LEA services.

Improve the way in which the council discharges its duty to ensure Best Value so that schools receive support that is consistently effective and provides value for money.

SECTION 2: SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Implications of other functions

45. Poor strategic planning for the provision of school places, asset management planning, special educational needs and behaviour causes uncertainties and confusion in schools. This has a negative effect on the extent to which schools can focus on raising standards. Support to improve attendance is effective. However, the management of the budget for education and the reasons for the decisions which are taken are not always sound or transparent. The partnership with headteachers is not built on a sound foundation of mutual trust, and there is suspicion about the reasons which lay behind some decisions

Monitoring, challenge, support, intervention

46. The provision of monitoring, challenge, intervention and support is unsatisfactory overall. The Code of Practice for LEA-School Relations has been circulated to all schools. However, it has not been discussed by members, officers and schools so that the principles which govern the relationships between an LEA and its schools can be used to develop a clear and agreed local working arrangements. Responsibilities, expectations, ways of working and methods of communication are not worked out in detail or operated in a consistent way. Although a few individual officers and some advisers form productive relationships with schools, overall the LEA and its schools are not working on a shared agenda that is firmly based on an understanding of mutual roles and responsibilities. This lack of a shared agenda leads to tensions in the relationships and has not provided a sound foundation for effective monitoring, challenge and intervention.

Recommendation

Interpret the responsibilities of the LEA and schools which are identified in the Code of Practice for LEA-School Relations into clear statements of working practices for monitoring, challenge and intervention so that there is a sound understanding of roles and responsibilities between schools and the LEA.

47. Recently, a system of categorising schools based on their performance has been introduced with the intention of using it to allocate support to schools according to their needs. The principles which underpin the system are sensible, but the way in which the system has been implemented has several major deficiencies which have considerably reduced its usefulness. The schools do know the number of monitoring visits they have been allocated. However, headteachers and governors do not know how the categories are defined and play no part in the categorisation. Hence, headteachers and governors cannot use the system as a tool to spur improvements.

Recommendation

Improve the transparency and effectiveness of the process of categorising schools as the foundation for monitoring, challenge and intervention by involving headteachers and governors in the process of categorisation so that they understand the reasons for placing the school in any particular category.

48. The categorisation does not define the level of schools' needs accurately. In National Curriculum assessments at Key Stage 2 in 2000, seven lower attaining schools are categorised as requiring light touch monitoring. Similarly, there is a lack of correlation between the category and the national benchmarking data. Some schools have low targets which the LEA has identified in the EDP as insufficiently challenging, but these schools have not been identified as requiring additional monitoring visits. One school identified in the last OFSTED inspection as underachieving has been placed in the light touch category.

Recommendation

Ensure that support is deployed clearly in relation to schools' needs by refining the categorisation process to reflect closely the school's performance, and in particular, take into account progress in meeting targets, national curriculum assessments, benchmarking data and OFSTED inspection findings.

49. Monitoring visits are only allocated broadly according to the categorisation. All schools receive at least two monitoring visits annually. Schools categorised as requiring a light touch approach are allocated between two to five visits which overlap with similar allocations to schools in higher categories of need.

50. The two monitoring visits which are received by all schools have a clear and potentially appropriate agenda, including setting the school's targets and validating school self review. During the visit which focuses on target-setting, the adviser, with the headteacher and a governor, repeats a process of target-setting which has already been undertaken by the school. In some of the schools which were visited, the adviser agreed with the school's target before conducting this visit. In these schools it serves no useful purpose to repeat the process.

51. The circumstances under which challenge and intervention may take place are also not well defined. Advisers have worked to provide an appropriately challenging approach, but this has not always been productive. There are sufficient examples of effectiveness to suggest that if link advisers' work was set in a climate of constructive relationships and with an appropriate balance between monitoring, challenge and support that they would make a more consistent impact on school improvement. For example, reports of the visit are shared with the headteacher and with governors who have found these helpful.

52. The circumstances in which the LEA would act to remove the powers of delegation from governors or issue a warning letter have not been clearly defined. In five schools requiring special measures, difficulties were identified in advance of the

OFSTED inspection, but action had not been effective, decisive or urgent enough to tackle the problems.

53. The distinction between the monitoring visits carried out in fulfilment of the LEA's statutory duties and the broader support which the school must purchase is obscure. Action to clarify this has been taken very recently. However, the definition of the role and agenda of the link adviser in written documents and in operation is too wide to be practical and still merges the objectives of monitoring visits with the wider provision of support in an unhelpful way. Many schools have received more than their entitlement to monitoring visits where the adviser has fallen into the trap of attempting to fulfil all the school's support needs. The adviser has, in some cases, provided useful support, but the school has not paid for these services. Other schools felt that monitoring predominated and setting the target held too great a priority, when the school needed more help in devising strategies to meet the target. In making this response, headteachers had not considered sufficiently the school's own responsibility to procure its own support nor the responsibility of school managers to work out their own strategies.

Recommendation

Develop schools' understanding of their responsibility for school improvement; ensure that schools fully understand the limits of the LEA's involvement; develop their capacity to procure their own support and help them to identify support which they can purchase.

The management of the advisory and inspection service

54. This is a small service that includes one senior adviser who is the school improvement group manager, four link advisers; two aspect advisers and 4.5 FTE curriculum advisers. The group manager for school improvement has responsibility for managing this service as well as the governor support service, multicultural service, study support and the children's university and parent partnership services. Since April 2000, she has also been the lead officer for the management and implementation of the Education Development Plan. As a third tier officer, she assumes an excessive range of responsibilities with insufficient support from the senior management team. Leadership for school improvement is, despite her best efforts, therefore, unsatisfactory because it is not located at a sufficiently high level in the LEA.

55. Resources and time are limited. There is no internal coverage, nor a regular arrangement made with external contractors to support foundation subjects, science and RE. Link advisers have a large number of schools. The support that a small service can provide is not clearly defined. The list of the tasks which advisers attempt to carry out is not practical or feasible for the size of the team. In consequence there are many signs of pressure and over-commitment of time and effort.

56. The lack of accredited contractors from whom schools can purchase support is a serious weakness. Some support has been purchased from consultants outside

the LEA, primarily to support secondary schools and specific literacy and numeracy initiatives. Few other ways have been used to increase the expertise which is available to schools. Some work is taking place to identify external brokerage and to make use of expertise from outside the LEA, but so far this has not been shared with the schools. A regional partnership with two neighbouring local authorities is in existence and provides support to specific initiatives such as recruitment and retention of teachers and training for headship. There are aspirations to try to develop this partnership further.

57. The cost of the service is £0.5 million and is almost all dependent on the central retention of funding. Schools have not been sufficiently involved in decisions about funding until very recently. Very little support is purchased on a traded basis even though delegation of the standards fund is at a comparatively high level. Currently discussions with schools about establishing an agreement on the future pattern of service provision are at a very early stage.

58. The service has a clear development plan that includes many useful tasks and carries out termly consultant with headteachers on the performance of the service. However, the plan does not give sufficient priority to the key strategic issue of defining a manageable number of services and extending the range of support which is available to schools. The service management conducts periodic reviews with staff of their work. Issues relating to the competence and under-performance of staff have been promptly tackled.

Performance data and target-setting

59. The provision of performance data for schools is good and improving. This is a considerable improvement on the provision and support at the time of the LEA's formation, when no data were circulated to schools. The provision of data is well managed, with the clear identification of a number of feasible steps which will lead to further improvement. Consultation with schools on the collection of data and training in its use are also effective. The data provided by the LEA gives a comprehensive range of local benchmarking and comparative data although they do not include details on children in public care. In a new development, minority ethnic performance data is shared with schools. The data which is provided are sufficient to enable schools to set challenging targets.

60. Schools value the data which are provided and have found them useful in identifying improvements. The data are widely used and training on their use has been well received. Two well-attended support networks provide opportunities for regular consultation about developments and disseminating good practice. At present data are analysed at the school level but a sensible start has been made at collecting data at the pupil level. Developments have ensured compatibility with national data collection especially the pupil level annual school census. The exchange of data between schools and the LEA is efficient, but not yet totally electronic.

61. Support for target-setting is satisfactory and steadily improving. Resistance in schools to setting targets is decreasing, after a very difficult start where the LEA did not give sufficient consideration to the tactics which are required to introduce

schools productively to a new and potentially uncomfortable process. Nevertheless, targets set for 2002 in some schools are still insufficiently challenging, indeed, they have already been met.

Support for literacy

62. Support to schools for raising standards in literacy is very effective. Swindon's planning is at its best in this area. The EDP not only reflects the National Literacy Strategy but builds upon it imaginatively in response to local circumstances. It outlines a wide range of activities which are then developed with great clarity in the literacy action plan so as to be achievable within the resources of a small LEA. The highly competent literacy team has been resourcefully augmented by making very good use of external consultants and leading teachers. The visits by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI) as part of the national monitoring have found the strategy to have been implemented effectively and consistently.

63. The LEA has set targets for Key Stage 2 that are realistic, though those set by the schools, taken together, are less ambitious. The mismatch is being addressed by analysing the data with increasing precision, in consultation with schools. Relative strengths and weaknesses in the facets of literacy are pinpointed and differences between schools are accurately identified. The emphasis has shifted more of the resources towards schools where standards are lower. Writing at Key Stage 2 remains the greatest relative weakness, and the LEA has responded rigorously to this.

64. Training and support of co-ordinators are comprehensive and of good quality. The importance of a unified approach to training and support is well recognised through headteachers' conferences, training for classroom assistants, support groups for literacy governors, family literacy projects and parents' seminars. There has been good training in the implications of the strategy for special educational needs, multicultural education and ICT. The library service is closely involved; there is a literature development officer who has co-ordinated a borough-wide literature festival to promote good writing and poetry. A national commercial organisation contributes reading mentors to work with children.

65. Secondary schools appreciated the introductory training and especially the opportunities to visit lessons in primary schools. Networks for heads of English or literacy co-ordinators are established. There is encouraging evidence of changes in practice in particular schools. As in primary schools, support is being differentiated according to need, although there were signs that some secondary schools, as with numeracy, had not fully associated themselves with the strategy, despite having been represented at the training days. The work is at an early stage of development but in view of the need to improve standards, especially the percentage of pupils attaining one or more passes at grades A*-G, it must continue to have a high priority.

Support for numeracy

66. The National Numeracy Strategy is fully implemented and support for numeracy is satisfactory. The EDP gives it high priority and, along with the strategy action plan, sets out a range of suitable activities which take account of local as well

as national issues. There is sound progression from general to more focused support as the plan proceeds from year to year. The LEA's targets are closely matched by the schools' aggregated targets. Given recent trends and the continuing good support, the targets are likely to be met and could well be exceeded.

67. The strategy is well managed and the expertise of the numeracy team is readily apparent. The kinds of support provided mirror, in most respects, the broad and effective package provided for literacy. Schools have rightly received very different levels of support proportionate to their needs and this accounts for the mixed views of LEA support in the schools' survey. The school visits, and those made separately by HMI in the course of national monitoring, strongly suggest that those which have experienced most support regard it highly. There is particular strength in the advice on teaching and learning, the demonstration lessons by the consultant and leading teachers, the perceptiveness with which gaps in teachers' subject expertise are identified and the help with selecting and writing resource materials. The support is readily available on request to schools not receiving intensive support, either bought in from the team or funded by the LEA. All schools have received the core training package and have the opportunity to review needs with an adviser. There is growing confidence among teachers in primary schools.

68. The strategy for Key Stage 3 is well under way. The introductory training and briefings last year were effective and the visits to primary lessons have helped to raise expectations considerably. The co-ordinators' training this year, conducted jointly with a neighbouring LEA, was generally well received, with some very good sessions. The co-ordinators' networks meet regularly. Some secondary schools have begun to review practice in mathematics and across the curriculum, and have obtained useful LEA support. It is too early to assess the impact. Standards decline between Key Stages 3 and 4. In numeracy, as in literacy, the effects of the strategy will require close monitoring. A secondary consultant has been in post since April 2001 and the consistent pattern of monitoring used in primary schools is about to be extended to secondary schools.

Support for information and communication technology

69. The LEA's support for ICT is very poor despite the high priority accorded to the area in the EDP and the ambitious objectives which the LEA sets itself. The deficiencies lie primarily in a failure to assess the situation accurately in schools at a sufficiently early stage, gauge what could realistically be undertaken and plan activities precisely. These weaknesses pervade the EDP action plan, the National Grid for Learning (NGfL) submission and the ICT strategy as a whole. Schools overwhelmingly rated the support as less than satisfactory in the school survey, generally complaining that they were left without sufficient guidance on both technical matters and the curriculum. A minority of schools have high standards, principally because of their internal resources and expertise, but overall standards are low. Information and communication technology is identified as a weakness in a high proportion of OFSTED inspections of Swindon schools.

70. The NGfL implementation began without any proper audit of existing resources. The equipment supplied at Phase 1, although agreed with representatives from schools, was ill-matched to schools' needs and took insufficient

account of how it would fit with later developments. However, all schools have received an allocation of £70 per pupil. A further decision was made to encourage schools to bid for subsequent funding in clusters, again without sufficiently considering the degree of expertise within the clusters or the extent of common interests between schools within each cluster. Some clusters were able to succeed as a group, while others met with frustration.

71. The initial prescriptive approach led to an expectation of technical support which the LEA could not adequately meet. The need to respond to cries for help and react to emerging weaknesses in performance prevented systematic monitoring of any depth in all schools. Information and communication technology development plans have been collected, mostly on time, but there has been little useful feedback to schools. Even now, the state of schools' facilities has not been fully analysed. The new opportunities funded training programme has been suitably launched with presentations by approved providers but there is uncertainty as to how well placed the schools are to benefit fully from it.

72. The quality of the LEA's own contributions to the training of teachers has been variable. There has been no shortage of written guidance, some of it good, but often it skirts round the schools' thirst for very specific guidance on the ICT curriculum and its application across other subjects. The LEA is now offering potentially useful schemes from elsewhere. Some schools, to judge from their development plans, have much to offer other schools, but there is little sign that this has been widely disseminated. For instance, in one secondary beacon school, the pioneering work in ICT across the curriculum, something which most schools find challenging, has not been promoted as the school had anticipated.

Recommendation

Improve the use of ICT across the curriculum by revising the ICT strategy, focusing closely on the central function of monitoring standards and finding means of brokering high quality support from outside sources wherever possible.

Support for schools causing concern

73. When primary and special schools are identified by OFSTED inspection as being a causing concern, support is satisfactory. Support is less effective in secondary schools, where issues of improving the quality of teaching and learning are combined with larger strategic issues of improving school buildings, the recruitment and retention of teachers and improving pupils' behaviour.

74. The number of schools requiring special measures has increased since 1997. Six schools, including two secondary schools, have required special measures. In addition, a further seven schools have been identified by OFSTED as having serious weaknesses and two schools have been judged to be underachieving. This represents a significant and added burden on the already stretched capacity of this LEA.

75. An appropriate committee has been put into place across the education department to help with the early identification of difficulties, but on the evidence available, a confident judgement that schools' difficulties will be identified and tackled effectively without an OFSTED inspection cannot be made. As part of this inspection, HMI met with five heads of schools requiring special measures and two heads of schools with serious weaknesses. The meetings confirmed that, in all but one school, the difficulties had been identified by the LEA prior to inspection. However, while additional support had been provided in at least three schools, this was not sufficient or effective enough to tackle the problems prior to inspection. In two schools, the urgency required to solve the problems had not been recognised and in one of these schools difficulties had been exacerbated through a period of uncertain leadership during an amalgamation of an infant and junior school.

Recommendation

Build advisers' skills so that they are confident in their ability to identify schools that are causing concern and so that schools' difficulties are diagnosed and tackled quickly and in a decisive way.

76. When schools have been identified, particularly primary and special schools, they receive the help and support they require. In at least four schools, new headteachers were appointed. Monitoring visits by HMI show that primary and special schools are making at least satisfactory progress. One school has been removed from special measures in a timely way and another school has closed. One school with serious weaknesses has closed.

77. In secondary schools, advisory support is provided and is useful in regularly monitoring progress and establishing support systems which will help to drive improvement. However, improvement has been and continues to be impeded by factors such as the poor condition of the school buildings and the recruitment and retention of teachers. It is clear that these problems have existed for a lengthy period of time, and unless they are solved, the progress which the school will be able to make will be both fragile and limited. In one school, although planning is taking place and some improvements have been made, there has been continuous uncertainty about how the school buildings and consequent health and safety issues will be tackled. The LEA has not undertaken sufficient work to develop a strategy for recruiting and retaining teachers and both the secondary schools which require special measures have been trying to make the necessary improvements despite the handicap of having a number of posts vacant. However, the LEA reports that both schools are fully staffed in preparation for September 2001.

Support for governors

78. The governors' support service provides good support. The statutory functions of providing essential information to governors, monitoring the composition of governing bodies and drafting statutory instruments are carried out well. A newly appointed recruitment officer is making good progress in recruiting new governors through awareness-raising in business and the community and by supporting governing bodies in their own recruitment efforts.

79. The training and advice are of good quality and are focused on those areas which help governors move towards a more strategic role in the management of autonomous schools. There is a good match between the themes chosen and the priorities of the EDP, for example, for literacy, numeracy, ICT, Special Educational Needs, target-setting and school self-review. In many of these important areas, the LEA encourages governing bodies to nominate lead governors to work closely with LEA staff. Information is presented in an imaginative variety of formats from which governors can choose, such as self-training kits for groups or individuals, 20 minute inputs at the start of ordinary governors' meetings and even breakfast-time sessions. A useful newsletter is edited jointly with the Association of Swindon Governors. There is a governors' helpline, which guarantees a rapid response to telephone enquiries.

80. Governors are assisted administratively through good support for clerks, suggested agendas for meetings, and databases of governors and training which are available to governing bodies. Reports of all visits by advisers are sent routinely to the governors. Since its inception, the service has offered its non-statutory support in the form of a buy-back package which has been considered very good value. Costs have always been fully transparent but, so that the competitive principle can operate more freely, all items in the package are also being offered separately as of this year.

81. Despite governors' respect for the governors' support service, there are serious reservations about LEA support more generally. Some of these arise from dissatisfaction at the handling of issues related to individual schools but even more seriously, about the help they receive in contributing to the management of schools. For instance, specifications of services are inadequate and there is little advice to governors on procuring services. There is also a widespread feeling that consultation on the broader front is superficial and that governors as a group have little influence on LEA strategies.

Support for school management

82. The school survey presents a negative view of the LEA's support but the school visits revealed a more complicated picture. The programme to improve management skills includes appropriate activities. The programme is clearly set out and includes support to headteachers, senior and middle managers, those new to their roles, and support for the development of the professional skills of teachers. Its impact in schools is variable and it seldom achieves what it should because the overall support provided to manage schools has significant weaknesses.

83. New headteachers and experienced heads new to the LEA receive an induction programme. They have all been assigned mentors who, along with officers, have smoothed the way into the job. All heads are encouraged to participate in the National Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers (LPSH) or National Professional Qualification for Headteachers' courses. The take-up of the latter has been good, although a number of headteachers dropped out of the LPSH, because of staffing pressures in their schools.

84. The LEA decided at the outset that it should confine itself to the more generic in-service training. There are a number of courses for middle managers in primary schools, although they have been concerned more with enhancing subject expertise than management. However, the shortcoming has been recognised in the current programme, which emphasises leadership in all the co-ordinators' courses. There are relatively few courses arranged centrally for secondary middle managers although some have been held in individual schools. Secondary schools, along with many of the primary schools, look outside the LEA for training. The fact that some schools see this as a failing on the LEA's part provides further evidence that the role and responsibilities of the LEA and schools have not been sufficiently clarified.

85. The LEA has produced useful self-review guidance and instruments which embrace all the school functions and align with the evaluation processes suggested by OFSTED. The majority of schools find them useful, the more so where they are able to draw on the expertise of a respected link adviser or consultant. This is generally the case, except where the relationships have been less than ideal or there has been instability in the LEA's staff deployment. Although the process of self-evaluation is developing in schools, its use to inform improvements in development planning and to identify the support that schools need is still at an early stage.

Recommendation

Refine the procedures for school self-review so that they help to support the autonomy of schools; integrate it more closely with other facets of school management, especially school development planning and on the basis for enhancing the schools' abilities to procure effectively their own support.

86. The *Improving Schools in Swindon* (ISIS) project is aimed at improving development planning, and it has been produced with partners under the leadership of the University of Bath. The LEA has targeted some schools, mainly secondary, for inclusion in the project, but a number of others have opted to join. The beneficiaries in the first instance are the senior managers, but middle managers are included subsequently if the school so wishes. Although well received, its effects in some schools have been limited because of the absence of project leader. The LEA made use of a consultant for the project, *How Can We Get Better?* which has just been published. Schools involved in the development speak well of it.

87. There is an imaginative and extensive programme of induction for newly qualified teachers in primary schools, including training elements which can be accredited as part of a higher degree. The LEA's contribution to the secondary programme is much less extensive, as a result of consultations with the schools. This is not always appreciated by the newly qualified teachers themselves who sometimes feel less well provided for. To make things worse, some teachers missed sessions last year when they were rescheduled due to staffing difficulties in certain schools. A good and well publicised scheme for new entrants in all phases is particularly important in view of Swindon's recruitment difficulties.

Recommendation

Review the programme for newly qualified teachers in secondary schools to ensure that the package of support is comparable to that for primary teachers and that it is sufficiently well-publicised.

Other areas

Support for early years

88. There is good support for the early years of education. The early years development and childcare plan is soundly based on a thorough analysis of local resources and takes full account of the Government's aims. An effective early years development and childcare partnership has been established, properly representative of all parties, and with a strong mission to provide early education of high quality. The maintained sector has increased the scope of its work, too.

89. Representatives of the non-maintained settings are well supported, not least by the LEA's prompt passporting of all Government funding to the partnership. They appreciate the improved inter-agency working and the raised capacity to meet special educational needs since the partnership was formed. There is some criticism of the level of support for individuals and of slowness in obtaining it, but the LEA has always responded positively and the panel had always explained its decisions.

90. Both schools and the partnership benefit from expert advice from the early years adviser, as the school visits and discussions clearly demonstrated. The partnership is becoming increasingly self-reliant in this regard through its own team of development workers. The maintained and non-maintained sectors work very closely together, often sharing professional development and training, for example in the introduction of Early Learning Goals and the new Early Years Self Review. The latter is unique to the borough and is designed to complement the school self-review system and provide a blueprint for good practice. It has been well received in all sectors.

91. Notwithstanding the favourable current situation, some of the planning following local government reorganisation had weaknesses. The lowering of the age of admission to reception was implemented without adequate re-training or equipment. Settings had insufficient time to prepare for new roles, especially where additional nursery classes deprived them of three, as well as four-year-olds. It is a tribute to the good work since that these difficulties have been largely overcome. However, there are still some outstanding deficiencies. As yet, the pre-statutory aged pupils in reception classes do not all have direct access to secure outside play areas. There are no admissions criteria for the nursery classes attached to schools which would guarantee that places go to the pupils across the borough most in need of them.

SECTION 3: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Corporate planning

The clarity, coherence, consistency and feasibility of corporate plans

92. The council is currently developing a new 30-year vision and community plan. This is a council with the highest ambitions which wishes to take the opportunity provided by recent local growth to develop Swindon as a European city. Consultants, commissioned to contribute proposals for the development of the town centre as a contribution to a new 30 year vision, note that Swindon has decided to base 'its renaissance on education and lifelong learning'. Their report gives a exciting vision for development but one for which costs are not estimated nor is the important role which schools might play in the plans for renewal shown.

93. Discussions with members and the chief executive have all confirmed that education is regarded as the highest priority. The council's four key priorities were adopted in 1999 – 2000 and include:

- Developing education and lifelong learning;
- Looking after our environment;
- Working to achieve equality and social inclusion; and
- Maintaining a strong local economy.

94. However, there are significant gaps between the vision and its realisation, between the priority accorded to education and the capacity to translate it into practical actions aimed at schools. The current action to develop the vision into practice has focused more successfully on developing valuable cultural resources for the community, such as a university and a museum of STEAM, than it has on raising the standards in schools.

95. There is a gulf between the expression of the priority for education and the level of investment in it. This is evidenced by findings throughout this report. The schools' perceptions of the helpfulness of the council's services were made abundantly clear through the results of a school survey administered in 2000. Yet there is little evidence that members or the chief executive's department have responded effectively to the concerns which were raised.

96. Overall, the education department's strategic planning is very poor. The council's education and community strategic five-year plan was published recently and first circulated to schools for consultation in July 2000. This provided an opportunity to discuss the priorities in partnership with schools with the intention of giving a clearer sense of direction and drawing a line under some of the mistakes that had been made in the past. The structure of the plan is complex and difficult to follow. There is no description to help to make it easier to comprehend. Diagrams of the council's planning mechanisms and statutory plans in relation to council activities do not add the necessary clarification. The plan develops two aims for school improvement and building a sustainable community. Each aim is accompanied by five very broad objectives. In addition, six supporting priorities are identified. These are, in effect, descriptions of broad areas of the department's work, not statements of

intent. They are therefore not priorities. Furthermore, they are not related clearly to the objectives. Action plans have been drawn up which, because of their format and title, might normally be expected to include a level of detail about the planned activities. However, descriptions of the rationale, activity, delivery plan, links and timescale are very vague.

Recommendations

Improve the strategic direction of the LEA by ensuring that major strategic plans are reviewed and that these clearly identify priorities and a manageable list of key tasks which are communicated to schools.

Procedures for implementing and evaluating corporate plans

97. There is a well-publicised hierarchy of plans which translate the 30 year vision into medium-term service plans and annual business plans. However, the structure with its various tiers of planning is complex and does not simplify the planning process so that it is manageable. The Best Value Performance Plan and 'Planning our services as one council', which is an annual budget planning document, are additional to other plans and not integrated with them.

98. The education department has attempted to link the activities identified in its strategic plan to the council's priorities. Each service has drawn up detailed business plans which should illustrate in detail how the objectives, priorities and activity plans of the strategic plan will be implemented in a coherent and consistent way across all services. The business plans helpfully follow a common format but, while the activities are mapped, the plan is not presented in a way that clearly shows how the strategic objectives will be met. Moreover, the range of activities proposed is beyond the education department's scope.

99. Tracking through the various levels of planning does not help to give a clear picture of the actions which are envisaged. The provision of school places, for instance, is a key priority. It is identified as such, but the action plan provides very little explanation over and above the effective use of capital funding. It does not provide the necessary background to the task to help to quantify the resources that might be required to plan effectively for such a major development. The service plan for school organisation consists mostly of the timescales for meeting the various statutory requirements and plans. The statutory plan for school organisation does not include detail of how targets for the reduction and expansion of school places in different parts of the LEA are to be met. Thus, despite a considerable number and different levels of planning, that must consume a considerable amount of officer time to prepare, the rationale, criteria and proposals for a key development are not clearly identified. Nor is the council helped to understand the resources that may be required to implement the plan.

100. Although there are strategies to monitor regularly and evaluate progress on the strategic plan, the lack of precision in the planning, the excessive number of activities and the lack of quantifiable performance indicators for each priority will militate against effective evaluation.

The speed, openness and effectiveness of decision making, particularly financial decision making

101. There are several consultative groups. There are monthly meetings between senior managers and each of the three headteacher associations and teachers' representatives; a teacher advisory group has termly meetings with elected members' spokespersons for education; the lead members and senior officers meet termly with the Association of Swindon Governors; and three advisory groups for curriculum and effectiveness, planning and resources and pupil support and a cross-phase group of chairs and vice chairs of heads associations meet with the director of education. In addition, the director of education regularly meets headteachers. However, despite all this activity, communication is poor and consultation is not productive in leading to more open and effective decision-making.

102. Consultation has become a burden to all parties. Some headteachers have withdrawn from attending, whereas others have become unduly vociferous. The tenor of discussion can seem unco-operative. The LEA officers do not always understand fully the reasons for the depth of the schools' concerns, and therefore not enough has been done to dispel the tensions. The problems have often arisen because the objectives for the consultation are not clear and consultation does not always lead to action. Decisions which are taken are slow to emerge and often appear ad hoc, with little sense of an overall direction. To those who are being consulted, the decisions taken sometimes bear little relationship to the discussions which have taken place. Feedback or explanation giving the reasons why the decision has been taken does not consistently take place.

Recommendation

Ensure that consultative groups are provided with a clear remit for their work including the issues on which they will be regularly consulted. Make the objectives of consultation clear and feed back on the results and the impact of consultation on the subsequent decisions.

103. Financial decision-making for the education service is poor. The borough has not been able to reflect its rhetorical commitment to education in an open or effective manner. It takes a short-term approach to budget making, with a limited sense of strategy and too many *ad hoc* decisions.

104. Schools have lost confidence in the council's approach to consulting, planning and reviewing the education budget and typically regard its performance as poor. Only a half dozen schools responded to the LEA's invitation to discuss budget preparation in the autumn of 2000. The remainder saw little if any point in a consultation which several describe as 'always telling us, never asking us'. The chairs of the three headteachers' associations who did offer advice on the budget process and made a presentation to members, felt that their efforts had been wasted.

The quality of leadership given by elected members

105. The quality of leadership given by members is very poor. This council is relatively inexperienced as a local education authority and in addition, a high proportion of new members were elected in 2000. Members have a high level of interest in and are knowledgeable about local schools. However, this has not been translated into effective leadership. Members have high ambitions for the development of Swindon but have not been able to translate their stated priority for education into actions which demonstrate a consistent commitment. For instance, they have stated concerns and an intention to support a rise in standards in secondary schools. They do review progress when a school is causing concern and with headteachers in every school following its OFSTED inspection - a role more suited to the schools' governing bodies. However, they have not received and discussed reports on secondary education standards more generally to identify how the council's policies can support raising standards. Other omissions in strategic discussions include the effects of low funding on school standards and quality and recent consultation papers on the role of the LEA and the Code of Practice for LEA - School Relations. In these respects, it is not possible to identify a continuous strong spine of advice to members, especially to cabinet, which would inform decisions on a range of strategic issues.

106. Members have participated in working parties on various developments such as the EDP. This reflects a well-intentioned desire to understand education, but it requires too much involvement in activities rather than standing back to take a strategic overview and developing an appropriate level of formal scrutiny at a committee level. Members have not been successful in developing the trust of schools and are not viewed as supportive. They have not done enough to ensure that the education department is appropriately staffed to manage the workload efficiently or that the services that are offered to schools provide a consistently satisfactory quality.

Recommendation

Improve the relationships between elected members and schools by:

- *clarifying the priorities of the council, ensuring that these are discussed and communicated to schools and that decisions are made that are transparent and in line with the priorities; and*
- *ensuring that members are involved at a suitably strategic level and through scrutinising the council's policies in an open and transparent way.*

The quality of leadership given by senior officers

107. The chief executive has undertaken activities which support education but these have not been sufficient to develop the corporate priority for education or effectively supporting the work of the education department. As this report shows, the pilot political decision making structures have not worked well. As a result, members' strategic and scrutiny roles are not well developed and members have realised this. While a training programme has been provided for members, they

need more advice from officers on ways in which they can become more effective. Corporate planning procedures have not led to plans for education which illustrate tangible and practicable developments. Improvement strategies such as Best Value and European Foundation Quality Model have recently been promoted. They are consuming effort, with little impact on the quality of services for education. Furthermore, some corporate services that are managed outside the education department, including payroll and Swindon Services, are the most heavily criticised by schools for their inefficiency and lack of responsiveness. However, above all, although some senior education officers are known to work long hours, no review has been commissioned to ensure that workloads are reasonable.

108. The quality of leadership given by senior officers in the education department is very poor. The strategic capacity and capability of the education department are very weak. A reorganisation of the council's services in 1999 resulted in the education department assuming responsibility for an increased number of areas and services. It also led to a reduction in second tier officers from five to three posts. The current departmental structure includes three assistant directors, for lifelong learning, strategic services and pupils and places.

109. The latter post has resulted in one officer holding an unrealistic level of responsibility. This includes school places, asset management planning, special educational needs and education otherwise than at school. The third tier group manager for special educational needs was not appointed until quite recently and by the time the appointee takes up post, the post will have been vacant since April 2000. In addition, the principal education psychologist has been absent on sick leave. Moreover, the officer with responsibility for behaviour and education otherwise than at school is also head of the pupil referral unit.

110. Capacity has been further reduced in other areas when staff have assumed acting responsibilities while waiting for posts to be filled. This was most noticeable when the adviser for secondary schools acted as head of lifelong learning. Currently, the adviser for Special Educational Needs has assumed some of the responsibilities for the assistant director for pupil support who is on long term sick leave. This pattern is likely to continue as the group manager for school improvement has obtained another post.

111. However, these staffing issues exacerbate but are not the root cause of the poor leadership and strategic management of the department, the evidence of which is included in the findings of each major section of this report. In addition to poor planning and a lack of strategic direction, while officers are reported to be very accessible, relationships with schools are unsatisfactory. This, too, has been made worse by poor handling of some sensitive situations.

Recommendation

Improve the strategic management of the education department by assessing its capacity to fulfil its tasks and responsibilities and use the findings to devise and staff an appropriate management structure.

Partnership

112. Partnerships with health, social services and the police have been effectively developed and lead to a range of useful joint strategies to support individual pupils and schools. The work, notably to raise the attainment of children in public care and with health related issues, has been usefully taken forward through some jointly funded work. Partnerships with other agencies such as the dioceses, the education business partnership and the regional co-operation through the Gloucestershire, Swindon and Wiltshire Partnership are formed on a satisfactory basis of goodwill and willingness to work together and there is much greater potential for collaboration.

Management services

113. Swindon's performance in providing or securing management services to create an effective infrastructure for schools as well as in helping schools to make informed choices about using delegated budgets to purchase services of good quality is unsatisfactory overall and poor or very poor in some key aspects.

114. With few exceptions, Swindon schools have only a marginal sense of the autonomy and opportunity which delegated budgets offer to them. Despite the widespread dissatisfaction with some LEA services, there is little enthusiasm for exploring options in the market place and little insight into how to challenge inadequate LEA services effectively. Although the LEA can point to a few instances where it has been supportive to schools considering other providers, it has not been generally helpful.

115. More than two thirds of schools reported that the LEA's advice on services from other providers and on obtaining value for money from providers is poor. Many are unhappy that the LEA's budget information does not identify how much is delegated from each of the LEA's management services. Many head teachers, and some officers, also describe the LEA's booklet of services as unsatisfactory. For those services that require purchasing, the booklet does not always make clear what will be covered by the contract or what the price might be. Moreover, in the absence of effective time monitoring, the LEA cannot say whether schools' purchases subsidise core services or vice versa.

Recommendation

Publish a schools' services handbook that specifies the services which schools need to purchase, with clarity and costs; provide advice to schools on purchasing from alternative providers and on how to secure Best Value.

116. Planning and control of school budgets are the only functions which on average scored good in the school survey, a view consistently reaffirmed during the school visits. **Financial management** is a very well led service with a strong sense of accountability to its customers. Schools have high regard for its group manager, and individual staff who support them. There is a high buy-back rate. The service has recently published a finance handbook which schools describe as a very helpful product of collaboration between the service and its customers. School budgets are

generally well managed and four year budget planning has been introduced. Schools could benefit further from advice on resource management, which the LEA does not yet provide. The service has been limited by shortcomings in the LEA's strategy for ICT which make it over-dependent on the manual transfer of data.

117. **Personnel** is a well-regarded service that provides highly satisfactory support. Schools describe it as a much improved and now well-led service focused on operational support. It also has a high buy-back rate. There is no personnel handbook although the service has a business plan commitment to integrate its circulated papers into a single volume. Vacancies for teachers doubled in the past year (to 1.7 per cent) a trend which, allied to the imminent expansion in classes, is a cause for concern. The LEA is collaborating with its neighbours to develop a recruitment and retention initiative, but schools are hardly aware of this.

118. Schools' experience of **payroll** services is varied, with a third describing it as poor and a quarter as good. Several schools referred to an improving service although a few schools visited had specific and too frequent examples of errors. However, a recent Best Value Review consultation identified general satisfaction with the service and 99.8 per cent accuracy of payments. This is another area in which information management and ICT connectivity are inadequate.

119. On average, schools describe the LEA's **ICT** strategy, support for ICT in school administration and electronic exchange of information as poor. Six of the seven responding secondary schools and three-quarters of the primary schools described the ICT strategy as poor or worse in the school survey, a similar proportion to that which schools reported themselves to the council in 1999. The council's external review in autumn 2000 concluded, succinctly, that criticisms were justified because there had been, 'under-resourcing of the ICT service, insufficient attention to ICT by senior managers, over-concentration on technical issues at the expense of business requirements and a lack of control over the outsource contract'. Education department managers and schools have seen successive initiatives flounder, investment wasted and little progress. There has been little impact on reducing bureaucracy or improvement in communication between the education department and schools.

120. The council has only recently taken action to improve matters, appointing a corporate ICT manager, approving an investment programme and specifying a new outsourcing contract. The education department, which previously had no dedicated ICT personnel, has appointed an officer to its management information systems to act as the interface between the LEA and its schools. Despite these steps and the evident commitment of those closely involved, many schools and some officers remain uncertain that the education department yet has the capacity to produce a coherent management information strategy. The recent Best Value inspection of the council's ICT Best Value Review concluded that it will 'probably' improve but did not consider ICT use within schools, 'classroom or administration'. Given reservations expressed in the Best Value inspection and the limitations in service planning and delivery for schools described above, the LEA is not obviously capable of sufficient improvement.

Recommendation

Publish and implement a clear and costed ICT strategy for the education service which ensures that:

- the LEA will meet requirements for the electronic exchange of pupil level data with schools;*
- schools can exchange finance and personnel information with the education department; and*
- the education department has the personnel and capacity to deliver the strategy.*

121. **Property services** present a major challenge for Swindon. Asset management planning, landlord responsibilities, management of building projects and building maintenance were rated by more than half of the primary schools and six of the seven responding secondary schools as poor or worse. The EDP says, "...a lack of resources has meant an inevitable backlog of repairs. In addition, a small number of schools have reached the end of their useful life and total refurbishment or in some cases complete replacement is overdue." Much of Swindon's building stock is in need of attention and it is all the more important therefore that the limited resources available are effectively targeted.

122. Officers believe that the capacity of the education department to organise **asset management planning** (AMP) may be inadequate, given the demands of the LEA's building programme. Although the first condition surveys were not all well done and schools often found them incomprehensible, many schools and officers report improvements in the process. That said, there is a strong feeling among schools that the budgets delegated for repairs and minor works are inadequate and that the LEA's rule that works up to a value of £10,000 are the responsibility of the school operates unfairly. Officers believe that schools have been inadequately prepared and slow to accept this responsibility; they describe the take up of Formula Capital and Seed Challenge using school funds imaginatively for leverage as poor. To the extent that this is true, the LEA has to reflect on whether it has had either the will or the capacity to prepare and advise schools well enough. Officers are now confident that new monitoring systems and improved reporting to schools will solve the difficulties associated with project management. There are, though, enduring concerns about smaller projects managed by schools which are often minor works contracted by Swindon Services.

123. Most schools purchase **school meals, cleaning and caretaking** services from the council's own Swindon Services. Dissatisfaction is high and a third or more of schools describe the service as poor. The services booklet does not make it easy for schools to check the service provided, or the price. Schools describe a service which has little, if any, sense of its role as a contracted provider in these areas, still less the "customer driven organisation" it claims to be. The time taken to deal with inadequacies in this service, too often, by too many senior managers in schools is unnecessarily diverting them from their other responsibilities. It is surprising that so many continue with the contract although some believe that they have no means of ending the contract, for several years, irrespective of the quality of the service.

Recommendation

Ensure that property, school meals, cleaning and caretaking services provided by the Council meet the expectations of schools and the requirements of Best Value.

SECTION 4: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION

Strategy

124. There is no coherent written strategy for special educational needs and discussions with headteachers and special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) reveal an almost universal lack of knowledge of the LEA's overall intentions for the future of SEN provision. Although there are several initiatives and developments that are intended to contribute to improving the quality of SEN provision, these are not stated as part of a coherent and comprehensive strategy that is easy for schools to understand.

125. The new LEA produced 'Putting Children First' in 1997 as a policy document. Special educational needs is included as one of the priorities of the EDP. The activities planned are designed to improve teachers' expertise in and the management of SEN in schools, but progress in implementation has been judged unsatisfactory by the LEA's own monitoring. Very recently, in May of this year, a position statement on SEN was distributed to schools and other interested parties with a request to comment. This has not helped to resolve the confusion that exists.

Recommendations

Develop a clear strategy to improve the support for pupils with special educational needs which is coherent and easy for schools and parents to comprehend, and which clearly states the place of special schools in future developments.

Devise a very specific SEN development plan which identifies actions, responsibilities, funding implications and deadlines in one clearly presented statement to meet the recommendations of this report.

126. The lack of a coherent strategy means that the LEA's achievements in improving SEN provision are lost amid a number of competing and overlapping reviews. The LEA has reviewed many areas of SEN provision and funding using the work of an external consultant. Progress has been made but it is piecemeal and lacks coherence. Schools are critical of the rate of change and the clarity of presentation from the LEA. The LEA has reviewed the provision of units for physically handicapped pupils and pupils with moderate learning difficulties, in the mainstream schools. This latter review was completed three years ago but implementation of the recommendations is still incomplete. Schools are not clear about the completion of the review and the resulting intentions are still far from apparent.

127. While it has been confirmed that for the foreseeable future, all six special schools should continue to exist, how the schools will be prepared to meet a broader range of need and contribute to mainstream developments are far from clear. For instance, the LEA has only just issued its SEN Handbook in June of this year. While there is an acknowledgement that amendments and additions may follow, it is significant that in listing LEA provision, no mention is made of the special schools or units except insofar as that is included in the photocopy of the Parents Guide to part

4 of the statement. This reinforces the view held by the special schools that they are not seen as central to the development of SEN provision in the borough.

128. A key policy goal for the LEA from the outset has been to reduce the number and thus the cost of out-of-borough placements. The number of pupils attending out-of-borough placements has reduced from 50 pupils to 43 over the last four years. It is reported that reductions have led to substantial savings. While the expected out-turn for special education recoupment in 2000-01 is an underspend of £99,000 due to the reduced use of Wiltshire schools by Swindon pupils, the planned budget for pupils at independent special schools has increased by 14 per cent from £1.24m in 2000-01 to £1.41m in 2001-02.

129. Leadership for SEN is very poor. Strategic capacity for the development of special educational needs policy and provision has been greatly reduced. Both the assistant director responsible for the division and the principal educational psychologist have been absent on long-term sickness. A key third tier post of SEN group manager has been vacant for some time. This has exacerbated but is not fully responsible for the lack of vision and drive to improve provision.

Statutory obligations

130. The LEA takes some steps to meet its statutory duties in relation to statutory assessments and the production of statements. However, the LEA cannot demonstrate that it effectively maintains all statements as there is an absence of effective monitoring, some confusion about the relative responsibilities of the LEA and schools, and a widespread uncertainty about whether the funding mechanisms can effectively meet the needs. There is no effective monitoring of the schools' use of delegated SEN funding. In view of the increase in delegation and the reduction in the reliance on statements, this is a very significant omission.

Recommendations

Clarify the responsibilities of schools under a system of delegated funding for SEN.

Implement a system for monitoring the schools' use of delegated funding for SEN.

131. The implementation of new funding arrangements has helped to reduce the number of new statements which have been issued. In 1997/98, 148 new statements were issued but this has reduced to 79 in 2000/01 and when combined with improved administrative procedures, this has helped to achieve the improvement in the number of statements completed within the time limit. The percentage of pupils whose statements are completed within 18 weeks has risen from 66.8 per cent in 1997 to 95.3 per cent in 2001.

132. The pupil assessment and placement team monitors the progress of annual review reports produced by the schools. Schools are reminded of their responsibilities and either educational psychologists or the physical and sensory impairment service (PASISS) team members are involved where there will be phase

transfer reviews. The reviews are scrutinised, but although missing reports are chased by telephone, there is no system for ensuring that all schools complete the reviews.

133. It is very rare for parents to feel the need to take their concerns over placements as far as the SEN Tribunal. There is a small but lively parent partnership service that has produced helpful documents and has been involved in both governor and education support assistant training, and is playing a valuable part in helping parents have greater access to school discussions about their children.

School improvement

134. Training for special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) is unsatisfactory. A number of opportunities have been planned in the EDP but few of these have been implemented. Teachers meet periodically in cluster groups, although there is no common pattern. The SEN adviser organises a small number of training or 'update' days each year including a termly primary SENCOs' forum. Some primary schools have received good training on the needs of autistic children. Beyond this provision, there is very little LEA provision for further training in SEN matters, despite intentions within the EDP.

Recommendation

Ensure that there is access to suitable training to enhance schools' capability for meeting the needs of pupils with special educational needs.

135. Schools are uncertain about the role of the learning support and the support arrangements from the special schools team and how these relate to the development of inclusion in mainstream schools. There is currently a vacancy for a teacher in charge of the service, the establishment of which is six teachers and an advisory teacher for dyslexia. The work is almost entirely with primary schools, with each teacher having a group of schools. Most primary schools have an allocation of learning support time, supposedly determined in relation to their need. Schools were unable to explain the basis for their allocation, and the inspection failed to ascertain what factors are considered and what weightings are attached to them. Increasingly, learning support teachers have seen their role as more concerned with assessing pupils to determine their difficulties and providing advice and training to teachers, rather than working with individuals and groups of pupils. Monitoring is done by an annual 'satisfaction' sheet completed by the school. The LEA is considering delegating to schools the funding for learning support, thus enabling schools to determine whether and if so how much of this they need.

136. A small, but well respected, team of educational psychologists is developing some imaginative practices in response to the needs of the clusters. Their contribution is much valued by the schools. A small team of four specialist teachers provides effective support for children with physical and/or sensory impairment (PASISS).

Value for money

137. The LEA's approach to special educational needs does not meet value for money standards. Its total SEN expenditure, funding for pupils with statements, special schools Individual School's Budget and home to school transport as a percentage of Local School's Budget, are each higher than similar authorities. The LEA has had difficulty managing these budgets and has insufficient means to monitor or evaluate their impact. In addition, within the EDP, the LEA allocates £665,000 which is much more than any other priority to support the improvement of the schools' provision for special educational needs.

138. The LEA distributes its budget for funding special educational needs slightly differently for primary and secondary schools. Funding is delegated to primary schools on the basis of social factors, free school meals and results of a reading test. For secondary schools, the equivalent formula is based on the proportionate use of free school meals and the number of pupils with statements who attend the school.

139. The mechanisms used are too crude to justify attempts at refinement in the formula. Significant needs will remain hidden using the free school meals indicator, because of the relatively high levels of employment in Swindon. The reading test has not been administered for three years. There is no recognisable correlation between the statement element in the secondary formula and the cost of making the required provision.

140. In addition, money to support pupils with special educational needs is allocated through an exceptional needs panel. The operation of this panel has been subject to continuous development in consultation with schools. This is the only source of funding outside schools' delegated budget for the provision in support of pupils with statements in mainstream classes. Schools submit 'bids' for resources for individual pupils, who may or may not have a statement of special need for consideration at a meeting of SENCOs of each cluster group of schools. Each cluster group, supported by the local educational psychologist, then determines which pupils are priorities. However, this is subject to an overall expected number of 15 cases which each cluster can be put forward for consideration by the central panel. Criteria to guide the decisions of the cluster groups and the central panel have only recently been circulated and are very broad.

141. This system has many serious flaws. Not all nominated pupils with statements are prioritised by these panels and not all the pupils prioritised have statements. Pupils who have a statement may have resources reduced or withdrawn from them independently of a review of their statement, a practice that appears to flout the intentions, if not the letter, of statutory obligation. There is no clear rationale underlying the determination of the number of cases which is submitted by each cluster group for consideration by the panel which can lead to inequalities of provision for children with identical needs in different clusters. The representation of schools on the panel including the chairmanship of a special school headteacher has helped to reassure schools that the panel operates in a fair and equitable way but nonetheless some decisions about individual pupils are still difficult to understand. Slightly less than a quarter of all schools (20 out of 83) have raised concerns about individual pupil allocations for this year. This system has little to

recommend it other than apparent simplicity of operation, though even this is questionable given that the council recharges the education service £158,000 for administrative costs related to the distribution of the £638,000 budget to schools.

Recommendation

Provide a comprehensive and clear system for the funding, placement and support for inclusive provision in mainstream schools;

- review, in collaboration with schools, the approach to pupil number led SEN funding to ensure that it corresponds to the current needs of schools in a way which does not increase bureaucracy;*
- establish an equitable and known formula for the allocation of learning support resources to schools;*
- amend the present exceptional needs arrangements for allocating resources for pupils who have exceptional special needs and are placed in mainstream schools, by strengthening the procedures whereby resources are allocated according to need, and developing a system which is compatible with, and protects the rights of, pupils with statements.*

SECTION 5: ACCESS

The supply of school places

142. In 1997, the new unitary authority needed to act promptly and purposefully to reduce the surplus places in areas where the school-age population had declined. It also has to plan for the new places which are needed when some 11,000 dwellings are built surrounding the urban area. Although Swindon has taken some action, it has failed to produce a comprehensive and coherent approach that will support school improvement. There are some mitigating circumstances, but the LEA has sustained inefficiency and insecurity at unacceptable levels and, therefore, has largely lost the confidence of its schools and some of its partners on this function.

143. The school organisation plan is mostly a descriptive and aspirational document. It does not provide clear principles nor an explicit strategy to which members, officers and schools could refer in their planning for dealing with primary surplus places. There are no links in the school organisation plan to the asset management plan, the LEA's strategic plan 2001-2006 or any other document which might offer insight into the council's vision, particularly for the primary sector.

144. The LEA's approach to surplus places in the secondary sector had mixed outcomes. It began reasonably by closing a school with very large surplus capacity which had been considered for closure previously. However, the implications of closure, in particular for pupils already at the school and the schools which admitted those pupils, were not fully anticipated. The processes surrounding the closure are widely held by members, officers and schools to have created tension if not ill-feeling which still affects relationships in the LEA. Surplus secondary places are being maintained temporarily in anticipation of the imminent increase in secondary age pupils.

145. The LEA's approach to surplus places in the primary sector has been inadequate and unsatisfactory. Significant surplus persists in too many of the schools which will not benefit from the planned new housing. There has been one primary school closure and some amalgamations, but surplus places in primary schools are above the national median. Twenty four schools have more than ten per cent surplus places and eleven have more than 25 per cent. In the autumn of 1998, the education committee received reports identifying eleven primary schools with significant surplus places. Nine of those schools continued to carry significant surpluses. The schools organisation plan reports that discussions have taken place with primary schools in the affected areas and 'further discussions may lead to proposals being brought forward in due course'. It does not say when this will happen or what options there are if proposals are not brought forward. Officers are not yet certain about the approach that should be taken at individual schools and recent decisions by members on the future of particular primary schools are not informed by a strategic view.

146. At the same time as reducing surplus places, Swindon has needed to anticipate the building of some 11,000 new homes on its borders and has had to face the consequent demand for new school places. It has faced some considerable difficulties in doing so. However, its present position is not satisfactory. Too many

aspects of the plan lack sufficient detail or clarity. The LEA has largely failed to convey to its schools and partners a clear sense of vision or purpose, still less to convince them that it is in control of the situation. Schools and, significantly, officers express considerable concerns about the capacity of the education department and the council to manage a project of this size. These concerns persist, even though elected members were advised in July 2000 that the programme 'has major implications for staff workloads'. In July 2001, the council agreed to establish an officer team dedicated to the delivery of major corporate projects, such as the improvement of Swindon's central area, and public-private partnership initiatives including those related to schools and cultural facilities, and that pump-priming funding of £2000,000 is made available for this purpose.

147. Swindon inherited a planned expansion. Section 106 agreement (in effect, outline planning permission) had been reached by the predecessor councils (Thamesdown and Wiltshire) with developers. The agreement included land allocations for community use but no requirement for the developers to contribute to the cost of school building. The new LEA appropriately commissioned external consultants to assess and advise on how to proceed. It has developed a credible plan for the secondary sector based on the building of one new school and the rebuilding of one existing school to create 18 forms of entry equally divided between the two. Demand for primary places will be met by building five more new schools. Funding will in part be from this 'asset rich' council's sale of other properties and in part from public private partnership initiatives.

148. Patterns and timing of house building are not following the original planned sequence, and so it has not always been possible for the LEA to predict accurately where demand will arise. This has created particular problems in the primary sector where the simultaneous opening – or not – of new school buildings alongside new housing has significant implications, typically associated with cohort and sibling admissions, both for the new school and for nearby existing schools over several years.

149. It would be remarkable if in these circumstances there were not some remaining concerns, but there are too many to allow anyone outside the council to express confidence in its position. Arrangements for the private-public partnership have not been finalised and consequently the secondary school which is to be rebuilt remains uncertain about short term plans. This is an urgent situation, as uncertainty has existed for some time. A recent OFSTED inspection of the school criticised the school's buildings and judged it to require special measures. The Roman Catholic diocese disputes the LEA's decision not to open one of the new primary schools as a Roman Catholic School and describes it as renegeing on a commitment made by the predecessor authority. Officers report that they have briefed members that one such school is a reasonable request from the diocese. The Church of England diocese does not feel that it has been kept as well informed as it should be about the need for its planned new primary school.

150. Overall, the council has failed to share a sense of vision and purpose about this project with its schools. Secondary schools claim that they cannot work out what the implications, if any, of the new secondary arrangements will be for each of them, and that the LEA is not helping them to do so. Primary schools in or adjacent to the

areas of expansion cannot understand the LEA's approach, have little confidence in the planning predictions, and believe that current admission decisions are creating local expectations that will lead to difficulties when new housing is built.

Recommendations

Provide training for the school organisation committee that enables it to assess the school organisation plan effectively.

Publish a school organisation plan which is fit for purpose.

Take prompt action to remove primary surplus places, ensuring that no school has more than 25 per cent surplus places (in the case of new schools within two years of their opening) and that surplus places overall are reduced to ten per cent.

Commission an independent review of the council's capacity to manage its major capital programme for education that also identifies the consequences for school admissions, asset management planning, personnel, ICT and information management systems, and report to members.

Make every effort to secure the private-public partnership related to secondary school buildings.

Should the private-public partnership not come to fruition, publish a contingency plan, which assures that sufficient places will be available when required and in premises that are at least satisfactory.

Take steps to ensure that headteachers and governors understand the LEA's overall vision and plan for school places, the interim steps that are required and their impact on individual schools and the service at large.

Admissions

151. The LEA's management of school admissions is satisfactory. Overall, it meets the needs of pupils and parents, but schools express significant criticism. The use of ICT and information management to support work in this area is underdeveloped.

152. An admissions forum has been established to bring together the different admission authorities in the town, and the published admissions booklet sets out admission arrangements clearly for parents. The proportion of placements which meet the parent's first expressed preference (97 per cent) is above the national median. One per cent of applications result in an appeal committee hearing and of these only one third are successful.

153. Schools criticise some aspects of timing in the secondary admissions process. Although there is scope for improvement in the LEA's approach, difficulties will persist unless all the secondary schools, including foundation schools, co-operate to align their admissions timetables. Secondary schools are also critical of arrangements for the admission of pupils without school places or for the transfer of

pupils at risk of exclusion. There is no agreed approach and there are no criteria for these procedures and the consequence is that no school can judge how fairly, or not, it is being treated by the LEA.

154. Primary schools are also critical of admissions arrangements, in the main those for whom the national government's infant class size policy inhibits freedom of admissions. There are also criticisms from a small number of primary schools that will be affected by the new housing development and cannot understand the implication of current admissions arrangements.

Recommendation

Use the admissions forum to develop a collaborative approach towards admission arrangements between secondary schools.

Provision of education otherwise than at school

155. Provision for teaching children who have no school place is unsatisfactory overall. Although the range and quality is satisfactory, the strategy and value for money it provides has significant weaknesses. The proportion of pupils who receive alternative tuition is too high and there are few signs that the numbers are being effectively reduced. The range of provision is very extensive and varied. The pupil referral unit (PRU), with almost 100 places represents extensive provision for an LEA of this size. Many components of this wide range of alternative provision have been introduced in a piecemeal fashion to meet newly perceived needs. Even though the provision is extensive, much of it is part-time and sometimes as low as five hours per week. The LEA has, as yet, no proposals to ensure that levels will be increased to full-time equivalent teaching by September 2002, when this becomes a national requirement. Costs are still very high.

Recommendations

Review and publicise for schools the costs of placements for education otherwise than at school.

In partnership with secondary schools, devise a strategy to manage and reduce the numbers of pupils requiring education otherwise than at school.

As soon as is practicable, and when the number of pupils being educated out of school has been reduced, increase the time entitlement of all pupils receiving home tuition provision.

156. All provision of education other than at school is managed through the education otherwise than at school service which helps to provide a level of flexibility in meeting the varied needs of pupils. However, the head of the service has an unusual range of responsibilities. He has acted as the LEA's officer who has prepared and managed the consultation arrangements for the behaviour support plan and is also headteacher of the PRU and the behaviour support service. As well

as this, he is responsible for managing the home and hospital tuition services, two classes for pupils with emotional disorders including phobia, and a unit for pregnant schoolgirls. This involves the management of some 40 teachers and ten support workers and a budget just in excess of £900,000.

157. Admission to the PRU is made through application to an emotional and behavioural difficulties resources panel. Some pupils who have been permanently excluded from school are educated in the PRU. The time which is allocated for their education varies. At the time of the inspection, seven pupils, all in Key Stage 3 - who have been permanently excluded from a special school requiring special measures have not been allocated a place in the PRU. They are receiving a maximum of five hours home tuition. This is insufficient and unsatisfactory.

158. The LEA's PRU provides a range of part-time short-term placements for both primary aged pupils and those in Key Stage 3 who are at risk of exclusion without cost to the school. Pupils spend two days per week in the PRU-based 'Fresh Start' groups and three in their school. This is well-planned provision that has a good rate of success. At Key Stage 4, placements are usually full-time with transfer of funding. Two kinds of provision operate: a group for Year 10 pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties and the Quest Programme for 24 Year 11 pupils at risk of permanent exclusion. In addition, the College of Higher Education offers part-time placements on vocationally related courses, recently increased to 100 placements, which are used by secondary schools for pupils who are not making effective use of the schools' provision and present behaviour problems.

159. The service makes specialist provision for other groups such as pregnant schoolgirls and schoolgirl mothers, two classes are provided for children with severe anxieties and phobias, and teaching support for three groups of children with severe emotional disorders in partnership with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health service. In addition to these, the home tuition and hospital teaching service supports children who, for varying lengths of time, are unable to attend school because of long-term health problems. The service responds quickly and effectively to needs and is highly valued by the parents of the children concerned.

Behaviour support

160. The LEA's strategy to improve behaviour in school is unsatisfactory. It meets statutory requirements, although arrangements for supporting schools are complex and are not all well suited to enhance the practice of inclusion by the schools. The proportions of pupils permanently excluded from all kinds of school are considerably less than the national average and than that of similar LEAs. They are also well below the target that the LEA set for the year 2001-2002 in its EDP. However, the proportion of pupils who experience one or more periods of fixed term exclusion is higher than nationally, particularly in special schools. In addition, there are many other pupils who for reasons of behaviour spend all or part of their time in educational settings other than mainstream schools.

161. The size and the range of part-time provision outside the mainstream school for pupils with behaviour difficulties is extensive (as explained in the previous section), particularly when added to the special schools for pupils with emotional and

behavioural difficulties maintained by the LEA. In contrast, support for monitoring and advice on the ways in which schools can improve their capacity to retain pupils with behaviour difficulties in mainstream provision, is thin. This approach is not good value for money, nor is it effective in enhancing inclusion. There is no clear overall strategic plan that will shift the balance to be more inclusive.

162. The original behaviour support plan was sound in most aspects, although it dealt mainly with alternative provision to mainstream school, and the specification of criteria for evaluating its implementation was weak. The plan has recently been revised and contains a summary of activities undertaken to implement the strands in the original plan. However, while it provides a record of what has been done, it does not set out a clear picture of the developments which are necessary for the future. A review of behaviour support services has been completed very recently. At the time of this inspection no decision on future developments had been taken.

163. Support to help primary schools consists of a team of 2.4 FTE teachers and three educational support assistants. It provides advice and training for teachers as well as supporting in class and withdrawing individuals and small groups, usually for a six-week period. Many primary schools reported that requests for help have been responded to speedily, and that the support provided has been of good quality. Primary schools also value the advice and help provided by the educational psychological service.

164. The respective responsibilities of the LEA and secondary schools for supporting pupils with behaviour problems are far from clear. The LEA has not made any significant changes in its approach in reflection of the direct payment to schools of the pupil retention grant. Grant funding for behaviour problems has been delegated to schools, and thus the major responsibilities for supporting individual pupils must reside with the schools. The LEA has done little to clarify the position or to ensure that schools have appropriate expectations of the LEA.

Recommendation

Clarify the LEA's and secondary schools' responsibilities for pupils with behavioural difficulties.

Shift further the balance of resources so that schools can support pupils more effectively.

165. The balance of LEA support is still focused on meeting the needs of individual pupils rather than advising and monitoring the schools' use of delegated funding. A very small team of two part-time teachers and two support assistants targets pupils at risk of permanent exclusion and those who are being re-integrated to the school following a period at the PRU. It is not clear how this service relates to the schools' own provision. Some secondary schools are in process of developing inclusion units that will offer a range of alternative curriculum provision particularly for pupils in Key Stage 4. The LEA has provided advice to two individual schools on setting up in-school units, but it has not provided a more general strategic direction to secondary schools on how the provision can be developed. For instance, written guidance has

been provided on the use of pastoral support programmes, but there is no similar guidance on establishing and maintaining in-school units.

Recommendations

Ensure that schools are provided with a range of strategies whereby they can support pupils with behaviour problems and know the services which are available for the purchase of support for the pupils and their costs.

Devise a strategy to advise on and monitor schools' use of delegated funding to support pupils with behaviour problems.

Attendance

166. Support for schools in matters related to pupils' attendance is overall satisfactory, with very few weaknesses. Attendance is close to both national and similar LEAs' averages. Rates of unauthorised absence have been reduced in both primary and secondary schools. If this can be sustained the LEA will meet its targets. However, these reductions have been accompanied by a comparable increase in authorised absence and therefore do not represent real improvements in rates of attendance overall.

167. The attendance policy sets out clearly the LEA's approach to encouraging good attendance and for dealing at various levels with absences. It demonstrates the forms of intervention available and the points at which these are likely to be invoked. However, it is not completely clear about the use of the more stringent of its powers. Until recently, legal powers in relation to school attendance have been used very sparingly, but in the last year the number of prosecutions has doubled and five parenting orders have been issued.

168. The education welfare service is effectively managed by a principal officer and has an appropriately sized team, although attempts to appoint a deputy principal have not been successful, so the service is currently not fully staffed. Education welfare officers are deployed in a coterminous way with the clusters of primary schools linked to secondary schools. This is good practice. However, many primary headteachers do not know how education welfare officers' time is allocated to their school. However, in all the primary schools visited, headteachers are content with the allocation, and value the service's willingness to respond quickly if asked to do so.

169. All secondary schools have attendance and progress assistants funded under the standards fund. This has proved a valuable initiative. They work closely with the education welfare officer and with the school's pastoral staff to provide first day of absence contact with parents, as well as to undertake daily analysis of the registers to identify potential unauthorised absentees. Some schools have valued this so much that they have employed additional assistants, and most are intending to carry on employing the assistant when the central funding ceases. A similar and equally valuable initiative has been introduced for some primary schools that have

the most persistent attendance difficulties. More recently, the practice of setting individual attendance targets with schools has proved advantageous.

170. The use of information technology is increasing the capacity of the service, enabling education welfare officers to maintain more accessible records of absences and to analyse this data in order to target their work more effectively. The education welfare service has good partnership relationships with other services, notably the police authority, the social services department and the youth service. Plans for development include very appropriate priorities.

171. The cost of the education welfare service is very close to the average in similar local education authorities and in unitary authorities. The service supports the schools well and provides sound value for money.

Health, safety, welfare, child protection

172. The LEA discharges its statutory responsibilities in these areas satisfactorily, and gives high priority to the health, safety, welfare and protection of children, although it falls short in one aspect, that of ensuring regular training in child protection issues.

173. The authority has sound policies on all health and safety issues and schools are given comprehensive guidance in the form of a safety manual designed to provide them with a 'toolkit' for checking health and safety features. This is supplemented by a range of codes of practice on specific issues. Training in health and safety issues is provided at no cost, but the take-up by schools is reported to be very low. A programme to undertake fire risk assessments started earlier this year, and is about half completed, while an assessment of the presence of asbestos has been completed and plans made for its removal or encapsulation.

174. The education and social services departments work in close co-operation to provide a multi-agency approach to child protection matters. A senior officer represents the LEA on the area child protection committee (ACPC), and the principal education social worker is the named person for child protection. Guidance to schools on procedures for dealing with suspected or reported incidents is secure, comprehensive and regularly updated. All schools have designated teachers with co-ordinating responsibility for child protection matters. Training is organised by the training group of the ACPC, all of it inter-disciplinary, and a central register of attendance at training is maintained. However, visits to schools indicated that some co-ordinators have not attended training for some time, and have not been reminded of the need for regular updating. A handbook for governors provides guidance on their responsibilities for child protection. Training is provided on child protection matters, though this has variable take-up.

Recommendation

Develop more systematic arrangements to monitor the uptake of training and re-training by child protection co-ordinators to ensure that all are aware of new developments.

Children in public care

175. The council's fulfilment of its role as corporate parent is a strength, and schools are encouraged and supported to play their full part in this.

176. The quality of provision to support children in public care is good. Since the formation of the authority, there has been a determination on the part of the council to see corporate parenting as a central responsibility, and the council's provision for this was in 1999 cited nationally as an example of good practice. Partnership between the education and social services departments in this matter is close and fruitful, and is evidenced in the joint appointment of a co-ordinator of children in public care for a two year period. There are plans for each department to have electronic access to each other's database, but this has not yet been achieved.

177. One hundred and fifty seven children were in public care at the time of the inspection, of whom 120 were of school age. Nearly all are in foster care placements. Targets set for attainment are significantly higher than national targets, and are based on prior attainment and a confident assessment of prospects. Last year 48 per cent of those in Year 11 gained at least one GCSE or GNVQ, which is two per cent short of the EDP target and 18 per cent above the national target. School attendance rates are slightly lower than for the school population as a whole.

178. The education department provides guidance for foster carers on matters appropriate to the age of the child, such as National Curriculum requirements, the literacy and numeracy strategies, reading schemes and support for homework. The council equips each home, providing fostering for a child in public care with a computer and suitable software to ensure that these children have equivalent access to ICT to that enjoyed by other children.

179. All schools have a designated teacher for children in public care. They also have a comprehensive and a well-judged guidance note on the role and responsibilities involved, prepared jointly by the education and social services departments. The co-ordinator provides training both for designated teachers and, where requested, other teachers also. Schools are being encouraged to prepare personal education plans for each child. Although still at a pilot stage, these are reasonably advanced and contain useful information for both schools and carers. Detailed records are kept of each child's attainment and progress, in addition to other necessary information.

Ethnic minority children including Travellers

180. The LEA's support for pupils from minority ethnic heritage is satisfactory with a number of strengths. Just over five per cent of the borough's school-age children are of minority ethnic background, who are spread between 70 per cent of the schools. The main groups numerically are Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean. There are also a significant number of Japanese children.

181. A very good database of overall achievement is being built up which shows that at Key Stage 3 and at GCSE the achievement of minority ethnic pupils overall is

somewhat better than the LEA average, though at Key Stages 1 and 2 it is slightly lower. Ethnic groups that are underachieving are identified and the deployment of resources has been modified to provide additional support. Achievement targets are now set on a more secure base. The analysis of fixed term and permanent exclusions of minority ethnic pupils has led to the provision of additional support. Much of this work is recent, and its outcomes are not fully reflected in the LEA's ethnic minority and Travellers achievement plan.

182. Following discussion with schools, a decision was taken not to delegate the ethnic minority achievement grant funding on the grounds that each school's share would be too small to enable worthwhile support to be provided. This is a sound decision, enabling the authority to retain a central staff of an adviser, an advisory teacher for ethnic minority achievement and a team of eight language and curriculum support teachers. Honda contributes about £80,000 per year to enable a team of three teachers to work in both the Swindon and north Wiltshire schools attended by Japanese children.

183. Approximately 380 pupils in 47 schools currently receive some degree of support in developing English as an additional language. Training is also provided for teachers, and parents' literacy classes and home visits provide additional support. Good central records are kept of the stages of language acquisition reached by each pupil, linked with records of their overall achievements, and these enable support to be suitably differentiated between schools according to need.

184. Support for children of Travellers is of good quality. The Travellers education service, which is organised separately, has a full-time senior teacher and an educational support assistant, together with a small amount of additional resource that enables school education support assistants to be employed where there is a need for extra short-term support. High rates of school attendance are recorded for children from permanent sites, though there is some fall off, particularly of boys, from Year 9 onwards. However, the service is having some success in arranging a programme with extended work experience of Key Stage 4 pupils. For children whose families use the site as a winter and spring base, the service, in co-operation with the schools, prepares packages of work, much of which is said to be completed when they next return to school.

185. The service is rated highly by the schools concerned. The teacher in charge of the service has good relations with and knowledge of the families and is well accepted by them. Good efforts are made to establish contact with Travellers, using roadside and unofficial locations. The education welfare service does its best to identify these, and the service has recently begun, with a considerable degree of success, to use the youth service bus to take a classroom to the children.

Gifted and talented children

186. Developing effective provision and practice for more able and gifted pupils is identified as a priority in the EDP. As a result of limited resources and alternative pressures, it has received only moderate and intermittent attention. What has been done has depended on the interest and enthusiasm of some individual schools and teachers, with some enabling support from the LEA. The progress made varies

considerably from school to school. Schools are encouraged to set targets for higher levels of achievement than the national requirements at all key stages. These are discussed with link advisers during the autumn target setting visits.

187. Arising from a teachers' conference held in February 2000, a booklet was prepared providing guidance on the identification of very able pupils, and offering suggestions for activities suitable for different ages. Schools have been encouraged to designate a teacher with co-ordinating responsibility for able pupils, and many have responded. Meetings of these co-ordinators are held termly in both primary and secondary phases, arranged by the LEA, and are usually concerned with sharing experience and ideas between schools.

188. Additional provision for very able pupils is unevenly developed in the authority's schools, some recognising this as an important aspect of their work and others not rating it as a high priority. The LEA's role of encouraging this work in schools has been somewhat low key, in contrast with its support of the summer schools and the Children's University. Provision for able pupils in schools is usually organised through extra-curricular activities, though some schools make some curriculum differentiation in the form of specific projects in some afternoon sessions. Summer schools specifically target very able pupils. Activities of the Children's University are arranged in school holiday sessions, aimed at older primary and younger secondary aged pupils, particularly in the arts and in sport.

Recommendation

Take more sustained measures to emphasise the importance of schools making at least adequate provision for the most able and talented pupils.

Promoting social inclusion

189. The range and quality of provision for the most vulnerable children and young people made by the education service show a determination to combat social exclusion. In particular, the provision for children with severe emotional difficulties and phobias, the enabling of pregnant school girls and teenage mothers to continue with their education, and the work in partnership with the health authority to support children with the most severe behaviour disorders are good. Less good, however, is the support for schools in meeting the challenges of inclusion, particular those of educating children with emotional and behavioural difficulties in mainstream schools. Sizeable improvements are needed in this context, including more effective strategies for behaviour support. The failure to produce a sound strategy for special educational needs is a major shortcoming.

190. Bids have been prepared to enhance a range of activities, some of them already operating in some schools which are intended to combat social disadvantage linked with low expectations and cultural deprivation, and include breakfast clubs, family literacy and learning, and dance and drama clubs. The LEA has supported the organisation of Children's University sessions in school holidays. These offer a very wide range of activities aimed at older primary and younger secondary age children. Response has been good, and in 2000 more than 800 children participated.

Some of the provision at Plas Pencelli, a residential centre in Wales, is specifically designed for disaffected pupils and aims to build confidence, self esteem, personal independence and group work skills.

Combating racism

191. The council has a corporate commitment to equality of opportunity and social inclusion. It has a council-wide equal opportunities policy. The multi-cultural nature of Swindon is acknowledged and valued, and schools are actively encouraged to reflect this in their teaching and community life. The multi-cultural education service provides training for teachers and support for schools on the development of multi-cultural awareness and anti-racism in the curriculum, and maintains a sizeable central collection of books and artefacts available on loan to schools. This is well used.

192. Clear guidelines have been given to schools about racist behaviour and on the determination and reporting of racist incidents. These are firmly linked to the recommendations contained in the Report of the Inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence. The guidelines have been recently updated, and in March 2001 a major equality and education conference was held to launch the new guidelines. There have been very few incidents reported since then, and the example reports seen indicate that appropriate action has been taken.

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

This report makes a number of recommendations. However, the following are fundamental in that they affect the LEA's overall capacity for improvement.

Identify, in partnership with representatives from secondary schools a limited number of activities which can help schools to meet their targets. Develop a clear, sequenced and practicable strategy for the improvement of secondary schools which can be included in the Education Development Plan 2002.

Improve the monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the Education Development Plan so that it focuses more clearly on fewer key activities. To inform the development of the new EDP, identify a small range of key activities – such as target-setting, monitoring and challenge, literacy, numeracy, school self-review, information and communication technology and the Improving Schools in Swindon project and seek information on their impact on improving standards in schools.

Improve the transparency of budgetary decisions so that these fulfil the council's priority for education by:

- conducting an open, rigorous review of current spending and future needs in the education service in anticipation of the budget setting for 2002-03, engaging schools as active partners in that process;
- ensuring that spending on and within the education budgets for 2002-03 reflects priorities which have explicitly endorsed;
- start work to ensure that each element of the budget which is passed to schools is clear to elected members and schools and is based on up to date data and a rationale that is agreed with schools. This work should inform the construction of the formula from April 2003; and
- ensuring that the basis of the apportionment of central charges to budget accurately reflects activity and true costs.

Review the schedule for conducting Best Value Reviews within education so that reviews focus on services and functions which are in urgent need of improvement.

Ensure that Best Value Reviews are completed to deadlines.

Consult with schools to identify and implement an approach to education-related Best Value Reviews in which schools have a clear sense of responsibility and opportunity to contribute to identifying strategies to improve LEA services.

Interpret the responsibilities of the LEA and schools which are identified in the Code of Practice for LEA-School Relations into clear statements of working practices for monitoring, challenge and intervention so that there is a sound understanding of roles and responsibilities between schools and the LEA.

Develop schools' understanding of their responsibility for school improvement; ensure that they fully understand the limits of the LEA's involvement; develop the schools' capacity to procure their own support and help them to identify sources of support which can be purchased.

Improve the strategic direction of the LEA by ensuring that major strategic plans are reviewed, and that these identify clear priorities and a manageable list of key tasks which are communicated to schools.

Ensure that consultative groups are provided with a clear remit for their work including the issues on which they will be regularly consulted. Make the objectives of consultation clear and feed back on the results and the impact of consultation on the subsequent decisions.

Improve the relationships between elected members and schools by:

- clarifying the priorities of the council, ensuring that these are discussed and communicated to schools and that decisions are made which are transparent and in line with the priorities; and
- ensuring that members are involved at a suitable strategic level and through scrutinising the council's policies in an open and transparent way.

Improve the strategic management of the education department by assessing its capacity to fulfil its tasks and responsibilities and use the findings to devise and staff an appropriate management structure.

Publish and implement a clear and costed ICT strategy for the education service which ensures that:

- the LEA will meet requirements for the electronic exchange of pupil level data with schools;
- schools can exchange finance and personnel information with the education department; and
- the education department has the personnel and capacity to deliver the strategy.

Devise a very specific SEN development plan which identifies actions, responsibilities, funding implications and deadlines in one clearly presented statement to meet the recommendations of this report.

Take steps to ensure that headteachers and governors understand the LEA's overall vision and plan for school places, the interim steps that are required and their impact on individual schools and the service at large.

Provide training for the school organisation committee that enables it to assess the school organisation plan effectively.

Commission an independent review of the council's capacity to manage its major capital programme for education that also identifies the consequences for school admissions, asset management planning, personnel, ICT and information management systems, and report to members.

Make every effort to secure the private-public partnership related to secondary school buildings.

Should the private-public partnership not come to fruition, publish a contingency plan, which assures that sufficient places will be available when required and in premises that are at least satisfactory.

Take steps to ensure that headteachers and governors understand the LEA's overall vision and plan for school places, the interim steps that are required and their impact on individual schools and the service at large.

Review and publicise for schools the costs of placements for education otherwise than at school.

In partnership with secondary schools, devise a strategy to manage and reduce the numbers of pupils requiring education otherwise than at school.

As soon as is practicable and when the numbers of pupils being educated out of school has been reduced, increase the time entitlement of all pupils receiving home tuition provision.

Clarify the LEA's and secondary schools' responsibilities for pupils with behavioural difficulties.

Devise a strategy to advise on and monitor schools' use of delegated funding to support pupils with behaviour problems.

Develop more systematic arrangements to monitor the uptake of training and re-training by child protection co-ordinators to ensure that all are aware of new developments.

The inspection team also makes the following recommendations.

Improve the management of school budgets so that schools achieve balanced budgets by:

- providing advice to schools on resource management including financial benchmark data; and
- reporting annually to members and to schools on the trends in school reserves and the use, if any, of those reserves to balance school budgets.

Improve the way in which the council discharges its duty to ensure Best Value so that schools receive support that is consistently effective and provides value for money.

Improve the transparency and effectiveness of the process of categorising schools as the foundation for monitoring, challenge and intervention by involving headteachers and governors in the process of categorisation so that they understand the reasons for placing the school in any particular category.

Ensure that support is deployed clearly in relation to schools' needs by refining the categorisation process to reflect closely the school's performance and, in particular,

take into account progress in meeting targets, the National Curriculum assessments, benchmarking data and OFSTED inspection findings.

Improve the use of ICT across the curriculum by revising the ICT strategy, focusing closely on the central function of monitoring standards and finding means of brokering high quality support from outside sources wherever possible.

Build advisers' skills so that they are confident in their ability to identify schools that are causing concern and so that schools' difficulties are diagnosed and tackled quickly and in a decisive way.

Refine the procedures for school self-review so that they help to support the autonomy of schools; integrate it more closely with other facets of school management, especially school development planning and on the basis for enhancing the schools' capacity to effectively procure their own support.

Review the programme for newly qualified teachers in secondary schools to ensure that the package of support is comparable to that for primary teachers and that it is sufficiently well-publicised.

Publish a schools' services handbook that specifies the services which schools need to purchase, with clarity and costs; provide advice to schools on purchasing from alternative providers and on how to secure Best Value.

Ensure that property, school meals, cleaning and caretaking services provided by the Council meet the expectations of schools and the requirements of Best Value.

Develop a clear strategy to improve the support for pupils with special educational needs which is coherent and easy for schools and parents to comprehend, and which clearly states the place of special schools in future developments.

Clarify the responsibilities of schools under a system of delegated funding for SEN.

Implement a system for monitoring the schools' use of delegated funding for SEN.

Ensure that there is access to suitable training to enhance schools' capability for meeting the needs of pupils with special educational needs.

Provide a comprehensive and clear system for the funding, placement and support for inclusive provision in mainstream schools;

- review, in collaboration with schools, the approach to pupil number led SEN funding to ensure that it corresponds to the current needs of schools in a way which does not increase bureaucracy;
- establish an equitable and known formula for the allocation of learning support resources to schools;
- amend the present exceptional needs arrangements for allocating resources for SEN pupils who have exceptional special needs and are placed in mainstream schools, by strengthening procedures whereby resources are allocated according

to need, and developing a system which is compatible with, and protects the rights of, pupils with statements.

Publish a school organisation plan which is fit for purpose.

Take prompt action to remove primary surplus places, ensuring that no school has more than 25 per cent surplus places (in the case of new schools within two years of their opening) and that surplus places overall are reduced to 10 per cent.

Use the admission forum to develop a collaborative approach towards admission arrangements between secondary schools.

Shift further the balance of resources so that schools can support pupils with behaviour problems more effectively.

Ensure that schools are provided with a range of strategies whereby they can support pupils with behaviour problems and know of the services which are available for the purchase of support for the pupils and their costs.

Take more sustained measures to emphasise the importance of schools making at least adequate provision for the most able and talented pupils.

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